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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 29 January 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County Constituency of Rochdale, in the room of Sir Anthony Joseph Lloyd, deceased.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Support for Children with SEND

1. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901183]

6. **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901188]

11. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901194]

12. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901195]

15. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901199]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): There is nothing more important than ensuring that everyone in our country, regardless of need, gets the very best education possible. That is why our special educational needs and alternative provision improvement plan will ensure that all children get the support they need to reach their potential. We have opened 108 special free schools, including 15 since September, and launched a £70 million change programme to test and refine our systemic reforms, benefiting every region in England. Earlier this month I announced an extension to our short breaks programme. We have a plan and we are delivering on it.

Liz Twist: Today, many parents of children with special educational needs, including those in my constituency, are at their wits' end. Either they are fighting to get an education, health and care plan for their child or they are struggling to access the right support when they get one. That is a waste of public money, a waste of parental energy and too often a waste of their child's precious potential. Does the Secretary of State agree with my constituents, who feel that the system is broken?

Gillian Keegan: I would agree that there has been an absolute increase in special educational needs in the past five, six or seven years, largely because we know more, but also because covid has added some pressure on the system. We have expanded the system and want to ensure that all children with special educational needs, even more than before, get the help they need. We have an improvement plan in place, which was published in March 2023 and focuses on early identification and improved support all the way through the journey. We are training many more people and putting more support in place for the hon. Lady's constituents.

Ashley Dalton: In smaller and rural communities such as mine in West Lancashire, populations and services are often very sparsely distributed and SEND students often have to either travel upwards of an hour to reach any provision, or go without. What is the Government's plan to address that issue?

Gillian Keegan: We have been trying to increase the number of places within both mainstream and special educational needs and alternative provision settings. As I say, we have 108 more special educational needs schools already built and 76 more approved. We have worked with many local authorities, including in rural areas, to make sure they get the provision they need.

Rachel Hopkins: Every child with special educational needs or disabilities should receive the high-quality support they deserve, but schools and councils do not have the necessary resources to meet increasing demand and rising costs. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the funding and powers available to councils to improve SEND provision?

Gillian Keegan: That is one reason the high-needs budget is up by over 60% in the past four years, and will reach £10.5 billion in 2024-25. We are also supporting local authorities with financial deficits through the safety valve and delivering better-value programmes. In most constituencies, including in the hon. Lady's area, the funding has gone up by 25% to 35%.¹

Debbie Abrahams: I also have several cases in my constituency, where children and young people can wait months, if not years, not just for assessment but for a plan to address their needs. Sense has reported that less than half of local authorities have multi-sensory impairment teachers, and the National Autistic Society reports that three in four parents say that their children's schools do not fully cover their needs. What are the Government doing about that?

Gillian Keegan: Our plan to introduce national consistency and standards will be published in 2025. We will deliver it through local partnerships and inclusion, digitise records, and make it much more transparent so

1. [Official Report, 29 February 2024, Vol. 746, c. 1 MC.] (Correction)

that parents can see what is happening. In terms of mainstream support, we will improve early language support, we are working with integrated care boards to improve support for neurodiversity in schools, and 100,000 teachers have received autism training. There is additional special educational needs co-ordinator training as well as vital early language support.

Dan Carden: My office operates a regular advice surgery for parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, in conjunction with the University of Liverpool law clinic, to which I pay tribute. There are simply not enough places in mainstream schools or special schools. Children with SEND from the most deprived areas are less likely to be identified compared with similar children from more affluent areas. What are the Government doing to ensure that children in constituencies such as mine are identified early and can get the help they require?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point. Early identification is absolutely key in providing support and ensuring that it impacts the child as early as possible. I am very happy to understand more about places. Local authorities have made lots of bids, and that is why many more special educational needs schools have been, or are being, built—I announced 15 recently. Although I do not know whether his local area bid into them, we have many schemes to ensure that local authorities have financing to improve the number of places in mainstream schools and special educational needs schools.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What work is being done to support local authorities in addressing the placing of children with special educational needs and disabilities out of their own counties and localities to receive the essential support they need? In Essex, the problem is ongoing and affects all our Essex colleagues. I pay tribute to our county council, which is doing incredible work—it is well rated—but frankly it needs help, assistance and support from central Government.

Gillian Keegan: There are a number of things there. We have put £2.6 billion into increasing the number of places—Members across the House will have heard of additional school places in their areas—and we have a £70 million change programme to ensure, through work with local authorities, that the improvement plan that we published in March 2023 goes from being a piece of paper to being implemented on the ground and felt by all our constituencies and all families with children with special educational needs.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the provision of training in SEND during initial teacher training to ensure that more teachers are aware of the support that children might need, and on the recruitment of specialists, such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists?

Gillian Keegan: We are implementing a gold thread of high-quality teacher training reforms to ensure that teachers have the skills they need. The Department has been exploring opportunities to build expertise, through a review of the initial teacher training core content framework and the early career framework, to identify

how we can equip new teachers to be more confident in meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND. There will be more investment in educational psychologists, of which there will be another 400, and more investment in early years SENCOs, of which there will be another 7,000.¹

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Similarly to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), I welcome the introduction of a new SENCO national professional qualification—I declare an interest, as my wife is a SENCO—but to create a truly inclusive school environment, all teachers need the knowledge, skills and practical training to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. What steps is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State taking to ensure that initial teacher training gives them that support and training?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and also for all the work he has done in this area. We worked together when he was Minister for children and families and I was working in the Department of Health and Social Care, and it is something that we both care deeply about.

As I said in answer to the earlier question, there is a golden thread of high-quality teacher training reforms. We will be looking at a revised framework and working with providers so that they can ensure that the contracts deliver the very best support for teachers. What will be vital, and something that Members will feel, is the additional 7,000 SENCOs that will be trained in the coming years.²

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Worcestershire County Council has some welcome plans to set up a new autism free school in Malvern. Recently, I visited Our Place—an independent provider—in West Worcestershire, which provides specialist education, mainly for children with autism. Is it the Secretary of State's understanding that such independent provision would be affected by taxation should the Opposition bring in a tax on independent schools across this country?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend makes a very good point: there are 2,408 independent schools across our country, many of which provide special educational needs support and excellent education in particular specialties. If those schools were subject to increased taxation, that would make provision more difficult. We will have to assess what that would mean.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): A number of colleagues have mentioned initial teacher training. Perhaps they and the Secretary of State should look no further than tomorrow, when my ten-minute rule Bill comes before Parliament—a Bill that aims to increase and ensure there is autism training for all teachers. Will the Secretary of State back it?

Gillian Keegan: I welcome my hon. Friend's work in this area. Initial teacher training courses must equip trainees to meet all the teachers' standards, including standard 5: that teachers must

"have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils",

1. [Official Report, 29 February 2024, Vol. 746, c. 2MC.] (Correction)

2. [Official Report, 29 February 2024, Vol. 746, c. 2MC.] (Correction)

including pupils with autism. Through the delivery of our improvement plan, we will develop new practitioner standards to support frontline professionals, including a standard on autism. I look forward to my hon. Friend's working with us.

Postgraduate Research Applications: Visa Changes

2. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of changes to visa fees and conditions on the number of applications for postgraduate research.

[901184]

19. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of changes to visa fees and conditions on the number of applications for postgraduate research.

[901204]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Our visa changes strike the right balance, ensuring we have a fair and robust migration policy but maintaining the UK's place as a top destination for the best and brightest from around the world. The hon. and learned Lady will be pleased to know that we continue to attract the best scientists from across the world: we have over 46,000 postgraduate research students from overseas, 41% of the total, producing groundbreaking and collaborative research.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I am afraid the evidence does not entirely bear out what he is saying, because UCAS figures reveal a notable fall in accepted applications from international students. Both Heriot-Watt and Edinburgh Napier universities in my constituency of Edinburgh South West are highly sought after destinations for international PhD students. Both carry out vital scientific research, with strong links to commercial and industrial needs—not just in Scotland, but across the United Kingdom and, indeed, across Europe and the world—but the Government's visa rules are making those universities far less attractive destinations for international students. Is the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), the former science Minister, not right when he says that the UK

“will never be a science superpower behind a visa paywall”?

Robert Halfon: I know that the hon. and learned Lady is a stickler for data. Our target was for over 600,000 international students every year, and we are well over that target. As I say, our visa changes strike the right balance, being fair to the taxpayer while ensuring that we have good international students coming to our country.

Chris Stephens: The minimum salary requirement for a skilled worker visa is set to increase by 48%, from £26,200 to £38,700, jeopardising the prospects of early-career researchers and academics coming to the UK. Can the Minister answer the question from my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) that he did not answer: how will the UK be a science superpower behind that visa paywall?

Robert Halfon: I think I have set that out. We have 36% of university researchers coming from outside the UK, and over 46,000 postgraduate students from overseas—41% of the total. What I would say to the

hon. Gentleman is that the real cost of the SNP's tuition fee policy is that Scottish universities are unable to provide places for local students, who are 13% less likely to take a place at a university in Scotland than English students are to take a place in England.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister be investigating the discovery, exposed by *The Sunday Times* yesterday, of Russell Group universities taking students with much lower academic qualifications for undergraduate degrees, and when he does so, will he check that the same is not happening in the postgraduate field, given the much higher fees that can be charged for overseas students?

Robert Halfon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He will know that, while I am a strong supporter of international students, I am absolutely clear that I want a level playing field for all domestic students as well. I met vice-chancellors only yesterday afternoon, as soon I had seen the report in *The Sunday Times*, and I have asked the Department for Education to carry out an urgent investigation into bad practice by agents where it occurs, as I was very disturbed by what I saw. We want absolute fairness of entry for domestic students as much as for international students.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I listened to the Minister's response to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), but in December I was also assured by the Minister that he was committed to the target of 600,000 international students. However, recent research from IDP has found 45% of its August and September applicants to study in the UK would consider changing their study destination if post-study work visa lengths are shortened. What is his assessment of the impact that any changes to the postgraduate work visa could have on the international education strategy and the sustainability of the sector?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman, the Opposition spokesman, knows that visa matters are for the Home Office. The Migration Advisory Committee is looking at the postgraduate international student visa route and will come to its conclusions. However, as I keep saying to him, our target was for over 600,000 international students a year, and we have well surpassed that.

Persistent Pupil Absence

3. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle persistent pupil absence in schools.

[901185]

18. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle persistent pupil absence in schools.

[901202]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Tackling persistent absence is my top priority, as indeed it was last year. I pay tribute to our incredible teachers and heads who have gone above and beyond to get children back to school. We are more than doubling the number of attendance hubs to support 2,000 schools, we are investing £15 million to expand one-to-one mentoring

to help 10,000 children and we will be requiring all schools to share data to support earlier intervention. Our plan is starting to work, with 380,000 fewer children persistently absent or not attending last year, and numbers continue to fall.

Andrew Gwynne: But by 2026, 2,435 children in Manchester, 907 in Tameside and 937 in Stockport are set to miss half their time at school if current trends continue. Labour has a plan to fix this crisis, backed by Sir Kevan Collins, the Government's own former education recovery commissioner. If this is the Secretary of State's top priority, why is her plan not working?

Gillian Keegan: It is working. It is not going to stick on the trajectory, because we have already turned around the trajectory. Since the pandemic, it is already falling in England. There is no better example of the Labour party having no plan and just sniping from the sidelines than on the question of attendance. I suggest that Labour Members look at other countries around the world because this is a global phenomenon. We have daily data that is almost unique, which is why we are now reducing the figures. If we look at Wales—Labour-run Wales—we see that attendance in school is much worse, at nearly eight days lower per pupil.

Chi Onwurah: The Secretary of State says that keeping children in school is her top priority, but since 2016 persistent absence in Newcastle has more than doubled and severe absence is up 282%. She says it is a global phenomenon, but what matters is what happens in schools in Newcastle. Labour's plan for schools is supported by Sir Kevan Collins. Why will she not support it? What is she going to do about this, because we need to see change now?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady may have mixed up a couple of things there, but the plan to get children back into school is to have daily attendance data, which we introduced and sent out to every local authority. Some local authorities do not perform as well—perhaps the hon. Lady's is one of those—but we send out daily data so that they can identify exactly where the schools are. We are working with attendance hubs, which we are introducing across the country. For individual one-to-one attention we have attendance mentors. We have a national campaign and a cross-Government action alliance, all of which has meant that England has a 7.5% absence rate, compared with 11.5% in Wales, and it is much higher in most countries around the world. We have a plan, and we are delivering on it.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I worked as a teacher and as head of year with overall responsibility for school attendance. Labour Members seem to forget that there is also a role for parental responsibility in all of this. In my time, I encountered a large cohort of parents who found that it was still cheaper to pay the fines they were given and save the money by going on holiday during term time. Is it not time to ramp up the cost of fines for parents who choose needlessly to withdraw their children from their education, harming the child's outcomes?

Gillian Keegan: Every moment matters in school, and we have improved and increased our school standards. The most important thing is that children are now

there. Thanks to our data, we can now see patterns and those who are taking a week off outside term time, or those who perhaps have a pattern of behaviour of taking particular days off. We can go into the data—we are about the only country in the world that can do that, so we are uniquely positioned to tackle the problem. We can go down into the data and work at school level and local authority level, to ensure that we put into action everything we can to improve attendance.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Attendance matters, and we know that some schools and local authorities have higher attendance rates than others. That is why the Education Committee, the Children's Commissioners and others all say that their top priority is to ensure that all schools and local authorities follow best practice guidelines. My private Member's Bill, the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill, will make that mandatory. I know that the Government support it, so will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to ensure that all colleagues across the House back the Bill, and no one objects to it on Second Reading this Friday, so that we can make best practice mandatory and get our kids back to school?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my right hon. Friend for all her work in this area. She is right; the first thing to do is ensure that we understand best practice, and that it is rolled out everywhere. A lot of work is being done in that area. I very much appreciate the initiatives that she has introduced, and I urge colleagues across the House to support her endeavours.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The millions of children persistently absent from school is a national scandal, yet last week Government MPs joined together to vote against Labour's long-term plan to deal with that issue, putting party above country and children. So far the Government have only announced sticking plaster policies. Will the Secretary of State come forward with a long-term plan to address that properly, or do schools and families have to wait for a Labour Government to finally give all children the education they deserve?

Gillian Keegan: Certainly not. Under a Labour Government, school standards would plummet back to where they were the last time Labour had education under their control—27th in the world for maths and 28th for English, if I remember correctly. Standards fall under Labour, and it has absolutely no plans to get children back into school. As I said, this Government have uniquely put in place daily data to enable us to get down and implement lots of different plans. We are also planning to legislate for children who are not in school, which I think was about the only thing Labour actually put in its plan. We are committed to doing that, and we warmly welcome the private Member's Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), the Children Not in School (Registers, Support and Orders) Bill, and look forward to working with her when it progresses to Second Reading on 15 March. I urge all hon. Members to support the Bill.

Falling Pupil Rolls

4. **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support schools with decreasing pupil rolls. [901186]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): I recognise the challenge from falling rolls when there is demographic change. That is why we are changing how the growth and falling rolls funding is allocated to local authorities—it is now based on decreases as well as increases in pupil numbers. We are also giving greater flexibility to allocate funding to meet the revenue costs of reducing surplus places.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Minister for that reply. Declining school rolls in London is a big issue that I have raised in the House on a number of occasions. We are seeing families with young children being driven out of London because of the affordability of housing and the cost of living crisis, and a new report out today by London Councils shows that the situation is getting even worse. In Lambeth we are seeing a 17.5% drop in demand for reception places over the next five years. Archbishop Tenison's School, opposite the Oval cricket ground in my constituency, closed last year. We need urgent action from the Government. The falling rolls funding is helping, but that is just for the short term. Will the Minister look at how we can protect our vital education assets? Will the Government finally address the cost of living crisis?

Damian Hinds: It is true that a period of change is coming as the bulge in primary school numbers starts to move into secondary schools, and it is important to plan ahead for that. We want to work with local authorities, and I know that the hon. Member's local authority, Lambeth, is being proactive in looking at amalgamations where necessary. We also have pupil place planning advisers in each region working with local authorities and academy trusts, and school resource management advisers working directly with schools. There will also be some repurposing of some space in schools—I am not speaking specifically about her constituency—with opportunities for more early years provision in some cases, and more special educational needs provision. We will have to be agile and ensure that there is still sufficient space for parental choice.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows—we share a local authority—when it comes to calculating demand for secondary school places, West Sussex gets a D-minus. One of my districts is oversubscribed and last year more than 50 children—almost all from one school—were taken out of district to a school that none of them had applied for and some of them had not heard of. Next year, it could be even worse. Despite help from my noble Friend Baroness Barran and the regional schools commissioner, West Sussex has still done absolutely nothing to address the shortage of secondary school places. Will the Minister intervene?

Damian Hinds: As I said to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), it is true that there is change as numbers move from primary into secondary,

and it is important to try to plan ahead. On the specifics of West Sussex, I will be pleased to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further.

School Attendance

5. **Jill Mortimer** (Hartlepool) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase school attendance. [901187]

16. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase school attendance. [901200]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): Attendance did decline through covid. It is now improving, but there is a lot more to do. We are expanding attendance hubs to support nearly 2,000 schools and we have launched the “moments matter” campaign to remind parents of the importance of every single day in school.

Jill Mortimer: In Hartlepool, we have seen a rising number of parents and guardians opting for home-school education. As of November, that number had increased to 186, more than tripling in four years. In addition, we have a huge number of children who simply do not turn up at school. Will my right hon. Friend please share the steps that he is taking alongside Hartlepool Borough Council to ensure that those children are receiving a fair and decent education?

Damian Hinds: I will. Local authorities have duties towards those children to ensure that all are receiving a suitable education and act if not. The consultation we held on revised guidance to help fulfil that responsibility recently closed, and we will publish the response in due course. We remain committed to legislation, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said, to create statutory registers of children not in school in order to help local authorities identify those eligible children.

Stephen Hammond: I know from speaking to schools in Wimbledon that access to mental health support can get pupils back into school or keep them in school. What plans does the Department have to roll out more access to that mental health support so that we can see that trend increase?

Damian Hinds: Of course, there are multiple layers to mental health support. The mental health support teams programme, which we are rolling out gradually across the country, continues to expand. At the end of March 2023, 35% of pupils in school or further education were covered by that, including 47% at secondary. When the figures for this year come out, I expect them to be higher. Unlike the Opposition, we are putting mental health support not only into secondary schools but into primary schools, where it can make a big difference.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The reality for mental health support teams in schools is that funding is not guaranteed beyond 2025, and the coverage is patchy. Earlier this month I heard about a teenager in a secondary school in my constituency who has not attended for four months because of mental ill health. The school is convinced that if there were dedicated, qualified mental

health practitioners in secondary and primary schools, attendance would improve. Will the Minister back my ten-minute rule Bill to commit to exactly that duty, to be paid for by trebling the tax on social media companies, which so often are at the root of those problems?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Member identifies important problems. There are important links between mental ill health prevalence and non-attendance. We will see benefits from the offer to all state schools and colleges of a grant to train a senior mental health lead, as well as the wider mental health support teams that I mentioned.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Early intervention is key. We need to look at what more can be done at primary school level because, although not entirely, often the signs are already there by the time children get to secondary school. Could the Minister say more on that? The transition from primary to secondary is also key, and we need to look at that.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. It is important to consider the role of mental health in primary as well as secondary school. We put mental health education on the curriculum through relationships, sex and health education, and we are investing in the mental health support teams that I mentioned, as well as the training grants. Of course, some schools do the transition from primary to secondary very well. It can be an unsettling time for children, but also an exciting one, and it is important that we maximise those benefits. There is a lot of good practice out there.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): In England, school attendance is impacted by off-rolling—a practice that does not exist in Scotland. Now, we hear in a report that schools are actively removing GCSE students, not for any behavioural issues but because they are struggling academically and the school wants to protect its place in the league tables. What steps is the Minister taking to address what the Centre for Social Justice has called

“a system which effectively rewards schools for exiting academically underperforming students”?

Damian Hinds: Let me be abundantly clear: off-rolling—removing a pupil from a school without using a permanent exclusion—is unacceptable and unlawful. That is in the Ofsted framework, and it is strengthened in the revised framework that came out in 2019 to look at that. That can be seen in Ofsted’s report. It is also looked at by the Teacher Regulation Agency. We must be abundantly clear that being involved in off-rolling is not consistent with the conduct we expect of a teacher. In serious cases, it could result in action.

SEND Places: Gloucestershire

7. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent estimate she has made of the number of school places available for pupils with special educational needs in Gloucestershire. [901189]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): Places for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities have increased in Gloucestershire since 2015. We estimate that there are 1,700 places, and the local authority opened two additional settings in 2022-23.

Mr Robertson: At the moment, 120 pupils have been assessed as needing special school places, but those places are not available. Over the next couple of years it looks like at least 200 more special school places will be needed in Gloucestershire. Can the Minister look at the situation urgently to see what he can do to help?

David Johnston: We are working closely with local authorities on this issue. We have allocated more than £1.5 billion of high needs capital allocations in the last two years for local authorities to create additional places. Gloucestershire County Council has announced a 200-place moderate and additional learning difficulties school for four to 16-year-olds, to be delivered through our free school presumption route in early 2026.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): There are only three specialist schools provided by the state in Shropshire. Two of them are—

Mr Speaker: Order. The supplementary question should relate to the question on the Order Paper.

Helen Morgan: Just as in Gloucestershire, we are short of specialist schools—two of our three are rated as inadequate and need improving. The most vulnerable children are unable to go to school because need is not being met. Will the Minister look at what can be done in Shropshire to provide places for the most seriously affected children?

David Johnston: In addition to working with Gloucestershire, we work with Shropshire on its capacity. We have already announced 41 new special free schools with a further 38 in the pipeline.

Cost of Living Support: Devolved Administrations

8. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Whether she has had recent discussions with her counterparts in the devolved Administrations on the potential merits of providing additional financial support for school pupils in the context of increases in the cost of living. [901190]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): I agree that, given all that the UK has in common, it is vital that we talk about policy issues frequently, including on devolved matters. The UK Education Ministers Council last met in June last year, when it was hosted by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in Liverpool. I understand it is for the Scottish Government to issue the invitation for the next one—we await their missive with anticipation.

Patricia Gibson: Expanding free school meals has a direct impact on children’s health, promoting cognitive development and improving test scores and concentration. The Scottish Government are rolling out universal free school meals for primary school children. What additional

financial efforts will the Minister make to address educational inequality, such as supporting and following the example of the Scottish Government to improve outcomes for all pupils?

Damian Hinds: We await the Scottish Government's full programme, but I will say that, in recognition of the benefits of free school meals and targeting them where they can have most effect, one in every three pupils in England are now eligible for free school meals, compared with one in six when Labour was in Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): To be clear, the UK Government will not even extend free school meals to children in households receiving universal credit. Speaking in Parliament two weeks ago, the Children's Commissioner for England urged the UK Government to expand free school meals, saying that children with an empty belly cannot learn. When will this Government follow Scotland's lead in addressing child poverty by rolling out free school meals to all primary school children?

Damian Hinds: We have extended eligibility for free school meals on three occasions, mainly with universal infant free school meals, the extension of further education students and, most recently, by extending the protections for people in transition on universal credit. I say gently to the hon. Lady that we think it is important to target free school meals, but that it is just as important for children in secondary school as in primary.

Early Years Education

9. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to improve early years education. [901191]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): This Government are rolling out the largest expansion of childcare in England's history, doubling the amount we spend now. This will enable more children to benefit from higher-quality early years education and childcare more of the time, building strong foundations for every child and enabling more parents to work.

Mr Sheerman: Why has it taken 14 years for the Government to get around to having a plan? They got rid of children's centres and Sure Start centres, and they have not replaced them with anything until now. Now we see chaos: people cannot get the code; they do not know what money they are getting from local government; the National Day Nurseries Association says it is a mess. What is the Minister going to do to clear up this mess?

David Johnston: There was a lot in that question. On the Sure Start point, we are rolling out family hubs, which will be a lot broader than the Sure Start centres were and will cover children with special educational needs up to the age of 25. As for the codes issue, as the hon. Gentleman will already know, we have worked with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to provide a solution to that issue for all parents so that no parent will miss out as a result.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I very much welcome the fact that this Government are doubling investment in early years and childcare. As the Secretary of State said earlier with regard to special educational needs, early identification of need is absolutely key. From that perspective, will the Minister meet me to discuss the urgent need for a specialist assessment centre in Worcester, after the loss of the one in Fort Royal? It has gone out for commissioning, but unfortunately we have not had any bids to host the new one, and we need to get on with delivering one for next September.

David Johnston: I do not know the details of my hon. Friend's specific case, but I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): With just over two months to go until the start of the expanded offer for two-year-olds, the Government's plans for early years education and childcare are in complete chaos, with nurseries and childminders across the country still waiting to have their funding rates for April confirmed. How can the Minister expect providers to confirm places with parents when they do not even know what they will be paid? Does he agree with the chief executive of the Early Years Alliance that this is yet another example from this Government of announce first and do the thinking afterwards?

David Johnston: I think the hon. Lady knows that the reason providers do not have their rates at the moment is that local authorities have not informed them of their rates. We published the rates in November and it is up to local authorities to tell their providers. Where they do not have those rates, that is the reason. It is yet another example of where the Labour party hopes that if it snipes enough from the sidelines, no one will notice that it has no plan whatever for childcare.

Mental Health Support: Secondary Schools

10. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to increase the availability of mental health support in secondary schools. [901192]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): We are rolling out mental health support teams to schools and colleges, supporting young people to access early intervention for mental health. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools said, as of March 2023 there were 398 teams covering 47% of secondary school pupils. That will increase to around 600 teams by spring 2025.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: When I was a young person, we had a counsellor in our school. It helped many people, not for the long term but through short-term interventions that put people on the right track and meant that they did not need more expensive interventions down the line. Unfortunately, those counsellors have gone in many schools. Labour will reintroduce them. Will the Minister commit to reintroducing a counsellor in every school to ensure that we spend now to save later?

David Johnston: Counsellors have a role, but we believe that a combination of rolling out mental health support teams and giving every state school and college in the country a grant to train a senior mental health lead is a better approach to take.

Degree-level Apprenticeships

13. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage the take-up of degree-level apprenticeships. [901197]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): The Government have built one of the most powerful apprenticeship systems in the world, reaching nearly 700 different occupations, from level 2 through to master's degree level 7. It is great that there have been over 5.7 million starts since 2010. There are now over 170 employer-designed degree-level apprenticeships available, including for occupations such as medical doctors, space engineers, midwives, social workers—pretty much whatever. We are providing an additional £40 million in the next two financial years to support providers in expanding their offers to make sure more people can access them.

Mr French: The Conservatives have transformed apprenticeships since 2010, with local education providers, employers and Bexley Council all helping to make Bexley one of the top boroughs in London for apprenticeships. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that apprenticeships have a key role to play in our economy and in social mobility, and that while Labour wants to focus on teaching divisive ideas such as white privilege in schools, the Conservatives want to support people from all backgrounds to get on in life?

Gillian Keegan: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Bexley's apprenticeship event on 5 February will be a fantastic opportunity for local people to learn about the apprenticeships on offer in his constituency. We have transformed our apprenticeship system. People around the world look at us and say, "How on earth have you done that?" I am very happy to work with anybody, but all that is at risk. The Labour party would halve the number of apprenticeships, taking us back to square one.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Sadly, the Government did not intervene to save Cumbria's agricultural college. However, will they decide to invest in agricultural degree apprenticeships, working with the University of Cumbria and Cumbria's further education colleges, to make sure we have a pipeline of new leaders who can feed us and care for our environment through farming?

Gillian Keegan: When I was apprenticeships and skills Minister, we worked together to ensure we had the right college offer in the area that was sustainable. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education will be very happy to work on that. We are looking to expand degree apprenticeships. We have provision in place to work with providers to offer many opportunities, including in agriculture.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Next week is National Apprenticeship Week, and I look forward to celebrating apprenticeships across the country. As the Secretary of State knows, small and medium-sized enterprises are crucial to delivering high-quality apprenticeships at every level throughout our economy, but the number of SME apprenticeships has plummeted by 49% since 2016, and research shows that the levy is failing to reverse the decline in employer training more widely. The Secretary of State pretends that everything is fine, but is not the real answer to back our businesses, giving them greater flexibility to enable them to deliver the training that we need to get our economy growing again?

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely. Obviously, one reason for the reduction in some of the SME numbers is the fact that we made improvements to ensure that every single apprenticeship was of high quality. I want to make sure that all young people who embark on an apprenticeship, as I did, put their trust in the system and get what they deserve. We have removed the limit on caps on SMEs, and we are working on reducing the number of steps to make it easier for them to access the system. We are also looking at what more we can do: we are focusing on a number of ways in which to ensure that apprenticeships work well for SMEs, which account for 70% of employment.¹

£40 Local Authorities: Funding

14. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase the funding allocated to the £40 local education authorities. [901198]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): We are committed to funding all schools fairly and equitably, wherever they are. The national funding formula replaces an unjust system whereby schools received different levels of funding for no reason.

Andrew Selous: It is welcome that funding for all schools has risen, but does the Minister accept that there is deprivation in market towns and villages where transport costs are higher, and that the difference between the sums for the highest funded local authorities and those for the lowest funded, such as Central Bedfordshire, is thousands of pounds per child? What can he do to close the gap more quickly?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of deprivation factors and, indeed, transport costs. We are increasing the amount under the formula that relates to deprivation, and there is also the sparsity factor. Of course, all schools are benefiting from increases in funding, which will total £59.6 billion in 2024-25.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): When it comes to the funding of schools, should not the Government just follow the money? Amber Infrastructure, which owns Newman College in Chadderton, has paid out £80 million of shareholder dividends during the time for which it has owned that PFI school. The heating system does not work, the roof is leaking—which is affecting 30 classrooms—and now two temporary classrooms must be built to accommodate the pupils. Will the Government intervene and point out to the provider that if the money is there to be taken in dividends, it is there to fix a roof as well?

1. [Official Report, 29 February 2024, Vol. 746, c. 4MC.] (Correction)

Damian Hinds: I would be happy to follow up the matter of the private finance initiative contract at that college, and perhaps have some discussions with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education.

Topical Questions

T1. [901208] **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), next week is National Apprenticeship Week. When I did my apprenticeship I benefited from brilliant training and opportunities, thanks to General Motors, which got me where I am today, and I want to spread those opportunities to everyone, everywhere.

This Conservative Government have built a new high-quality apprenticeship system from the ground up. Nearly 70% of occupations are now accessible via apprenticeships, and we have delivered 5.7 million apprenticeship starts since 2010. A week from today, we will kick off National Apprenticeship Week. I ask all Members to go on a visit to meet apprentices and talk about the opportunities that are available throughout the country—a real example of levelling up. All my Ministers and I will be out, across the country, celebrating different industries and providers, and with hundreds of apprentices. This is why Labour's policy to halve the number of apprenticeships is so dangerous: it would remove opportunities from people like me, taking us back to square one.

Emma Hardy: I look forward to Fact Check's assessment of the Secretary of State's comments. Given that 2,730 children in Hull are waiting more than 12 weeks for their first mental health appointment, is it pride or inattentiveness that prevents the Secretary of State from adopting Labour's plan for a mental health professional in every school?

Gillian Keegan: If I may "fact check" the hon. Lady, I think that the plan is for a mental health professional in every secondary school. The plan that we have is to introduce mental health support teams in every primary and secondary school. As usual, our plans, on which we are delivering, are better thought through, cover more people, and solve the problem that they are intended to solve.

T2. [901209] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Very welcome remediation work on reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—is now under way at Kingsdown School in Leigh-on-Sea, meaning that parts of the school will be open from half term. However, the school has still not had confirmation, given the extent of the RAAC, on whether there will be a rebuild of the school. This uncertainty is affecting remediation, expansion and recruitment plans. Please could we have that confirmation for the school as soon as possible?

Gillian Keegan: I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned tirelessly for Kingsdown School. Our questionnaire programme is 100% complete, all schools have been told if it is suspected that they might have

RAAC and 100% of those have been surveyed. I can confirm we will be removing RAAC from our schools for good, either through the school rebuilding programme or through grant funding, and we will inform schools shortly, once our assessments have concluded. I know that my hon. Friend has met Baroness Barran to discuss Kingsdown School and is meeting again this week.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Students at St Leonard's School in Durham are working hard for their exams, but they are facing sustained and ongoing disruption, including challenges to doing practical coursework, off-site teaching and being bussed around the city, all because of RAAC. There is no firm date for the rebuilding to commence, and that is just not good enough. It is putting young people's futures at risk. Will the Secretary of State now work with the regulator and the exam boards on mitigations for the small number of young people whose life chances are being put at risk by Government failure?

Gillian Keegan: As the hon. Lady knows, we have been working closely with St Leonard's School, and actually with all schools that were impacted by RAAC. I would like to take this moment to thank the headteachers and all the teachers who have done an amazing job to keep 100% of children in face-to-face education. We have spoken to the award bodies. They have been working with schools and have offered some support in terms of assessments and making sure that they can look at what more needs to be done, but exams are there to assess—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are having this problem every time. Topicals are meant to be short and punchy. I have to get all these Members in, but all you are doing is stopping them getting in. If that is the ploy, it is not going to work.

T6. [901213] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already mentioned the article in *The Sunday Times*, but is she aware that it is comparing apples and oranges? British students go straight into a degree course in the first year, but these overseas students referred to are foundation year students who are not on the degree course. They are doing the equivalent of A-level exams.

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Of course I agree that, on entry requirements, we should ensure that we are comparing like for like and being fair to our brilliant domestic students. I was appalled to see the reporting over the weekend, which clearly showed bad practice in the use of agents. That is not acceptable. As I have said, I met Universities UK and the vice-chancellors yesterday and we are going to sort this out. There is an investigation by the Department for Education.

Bridget Phillipson: "It's not our fault" always seems to be this Government's catchphrase, and now it applies to childcare too: it is not the Secretary of State's fault but that of local authorities; it is not her responsibility to deliver on her Government's own pledge. Even her own civil servants are saying that some parents just will not get their places. Does she agree with the Children's Minister that no parents will lose out? Will she give that guarantee to the House today—yes or no?

Gillian Keegan: I am glad that the hon. Lady has asked about childcare, because it is yet another illustration of how this Conservative Government are delivering for working parents while the Labour party still does not have a plan. I know what it takes to deliver complex projects. I have delivered many over three decades working in industry all around the world. Given the hon. Lady's limited experience outside politics, she should focus on not playing party politics and deliver for hard-working parents.

T7. [901214] **Sir Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Educational psychologists are enormously important. What progress are the Government making on their current recruitment drive to increase their number?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a highly competitive training scheme. Between 2017 and 2019 the Department filled all 160 of its funded training places per year, and since 2020 it has filled all 200 of the funded places each year. We have now committed to training a further 400 educational psychologists.¹

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Lady agree that we need highly qualified, excellent teachers in every school? Is she worried, as I am, that so many highly qualified, gifted teachers are leaving the profession after just a few years?

Gillian Keegan: Of course I agree, which is why I am delighted that we have 27,000 more teachers in our schools than we had in 2010. We have a retention and recruitment plan with many different facets to make sure that we retain our excellent teachers.

T10. [901217] **Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): Working with one of my secondary schools, John Whitgift Academy, we have created a pilot scheme called "Opportunity Grimsby", in which year 8 students and their parents are linked with local businesses. That will form part of a scheme in which the student is a workplace mentee until year 11. Will my right hon. Friend commit to coming to Grimsby to see how well the scheme is doing?

Robert Halfon: I would be delighted to come to Grimsby. I congratulate my hon. Friend on becoming the apprenticeship diversity champion. She is a skills champion, and what she is doing on careers and mentoring in Grimsby is a model example of what should be done across the country.

T4. [901211] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This month's Joseph Rowntree Foundation report sets out how childhood poverty impacts on educational attainment, and how the consequences last a lifetime, entrenching intergenerational poverty. Forty-two per cent of children in Newcastle are growing up in poverty. Will the Secretary of State support Labour's call for free breakfast clubs in every primary school, to give those children the best start in life?

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): We are investing very heavily in breakfast clubs. This is another area in which we think that targeting support matters. That includes secondary schools, not just primary schools, as the Labour party suggests.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Is it not a disgrace that young children are told to cover up their badges so that people do not know which school they attend, and are told to remove outward signs that they are Jewish? Security is provided once they get to school, but what will my right hon. Friend do to make sure that children are educated on the evils of antisemitism, so that we spread this message across all schools, rather than just Jewish schools?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right. After Holocaust Memorial Day, we are acutely conscious of the continuing need to act against antisemitism. One of the things we are doing is launching a new fund for both schools and higher education, to try to address antisemitism effectively at its root.

T5. [901212] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Each year, students have to apply for the Turing international mobility scheme before the Easter deadline, but those from widening participation backgrounds need to know that they have the money before they apply, and universities are getting confirmation of funding some months later, in June and July. I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that Turing should be open to all, so will she press Treasury colleagues for a multi-year funding settlement?

Robert Halfon: I have enormous respect for the hon. Gentleman, and I listen carefully to what he says. We are working to smooth out any issues with the Turing scheme. However, it is worth noting that we have increased the proportion of disadvantaged students taking part in it from 50% to 60%. I am proud that we are embedding social justice in the scheme.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Will students affected by RAAC, such as those at Thornleigh Salesian College in Bolton, receive special dispensation in their GCSEs and A-levels? I recently met the college's exceptional headteacher, Mrs O'Callaghan, and I take this opportunity to wish her all the best on her well deserved retirement at the end of the year.

Damian Hinds: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating, commending and thanking Mrs O'Callaghan on her life's work. I appreciate that the RAAC situation in schools has been very difficult, which is why we are trying to work with them on things like coursework assessment. They should be in touch with awarding bodies. We are also making sure that we reimburse all reasonable revenue costs.

T8. [901215] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I recently met headteachers in West Derby, who shared with me their serious concerns that the current Ofsted inspection model is not fit for purpose, is deeply unfair and is driving teachers out of a profession they love. In the light of today's Education Committee report, will the Secretary of State meet me and the experienced educators in Liverpool, West Derby, to discuss their concerns and what they feel needs to change?

Damian Hinds: I pay tribute to the headteachers in Liverpool, West Derby. We think it is important to have an independent inspectorate, and we think it is important that assessments are clear. In the wake of the tragedy of

1. [Official Report, 8 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 6MC.] (Correction)

Ruth Perry, it is right that we think about all the aspects, some of which have already changed. To be clear, we think it continues to be important that there be a clear external assessment for parents.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Families across Tipton and Wednesbury are still struggling to get an initial assessment for children with SEND. What work is my right hon. Friend doing to hold organisations such as child and adolescent mental health services to account, so that we ensure that these assessments are done quickly?

David Johnston: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. We are working with all local authorities, through our SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, to make sure that assessments happen a lot quicker, and that children get the support they need.

T9. [901216] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): School exclusions and suspensions are on the rise. Children who have experienced trauma are at the greatest risk of exclusion, which only adds to the overall negative outcome for children with adverse childhood experiences, yet the Department's behaviour guidance makes no reference to childhood trauma. Will the Minister meet the all-party group on childhood trauma to discuss how we can develop better guidance to take account of childhood trauma?

Damian Hinds: We want to see schools not excluding children where that is at all possible. There is no right number for exclusions; they have to be determined in the light of the circumstances at the school, but we expect people to look at the matter as a whole. I will, of course, be happy to talk to the hon. Lady.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her earlier answers about RAAC. Will she give priority for a complete rebuild to St Edward's Catholic Academy in my constituency, following the adjudication that more than 80% of it is affected by RAAC? Can the plans start very soon, please?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, I can give an assurance that we are going through all the details and assessing each instance on a case-by-case basis. I know that all hon. Members are keen to know what will happen, and they will have the answers very shortly.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The changes in the visa rules for international students and their dependants are having a significant impact, not only on the number of students coming to universities such as the University of York, a Russell Group university, but on these universities' finances. Universities will have

to make significant cuts if this visa programme reaches fruition. Will the Minister meet vice-chancellors and the Home Office, together, to talk about the impact this is having?

Robert Halfon: We have regular conversations with vice-chancellors and the Home Office on this issue. However, as I say, our target has been more than 600,000 students and we have well surpassed that, and 36% of university researchers come from outside the UK. We have a proud record on international students and that will continue.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): St Peter's Church of England Primary School in Budleigh Salterton is an excellent school, but it is being let down by temporary classrooms that are way past their best. Temporary classrooms should be just that: temporary, not a permanent solution. Further to my letter, which is winding its way through the Department, will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss this matter further?

Damian Hinds: I will.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Children's services are struggling, and in too many parts of England, outcomes for children are just not good enough. What conversations has the children's Minister had with those in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about both resources and capacity for children's services? What measures will he take where councils underperform, and thus let children down?

David Johnston: We have very regular conversations with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on that issue, as part of our "Stable homes, built on love" reforms to transform the children's social care system, and we take strict action where local authorities are not meeting the requirements.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council is, bizarrely, taking parents to court to challenge their legal right to secure special educational support for their children. With the council losing 90% of those cases and this costing £100,000 every three months, will the Secretary of State join me in asking the council to think again? Will she agree to meet me to discuss special educational needs provision for Bournemouth?

David Johnston: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We are concerned by any local authority spending too much money taking parents to court. Children need to get the right support, in the right setting, at the right time, and I would be happy to have a discussion with him about that.

Post Office Ltd

3.38 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on the removal of Henry Staunton as Post Office Ltd chair and wider governance issues within the organisation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Following a conversation with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade over the weekend, Henry Staunton agreed to step down as chairman of the Post Office. An interim chair will be appointed shortly, and a recruitment process for a new chair will be launched in due course, in accordance with the governance code for public appointments. I will update the House when we have further details.

The current chairmanship was not proving effective, and we had a difficult decision: change course, or wait and hope that it improves. Given the challenging context for the Post Office and the importance of the role of chair, the Business Secretary took decisive action. I understand that Members would like more details around the decision, especially considering that the Post Office is rightly under heightened scrutiny at this time. I can confirm that there were issues beyond the handling of the Horizon scandal, but as hon. Members would expect, I am not able to comment on the specifics of individual human resources cases.

As the Business Secretary has said, Post Office governance is a priority for the Government. The Post Office is a public corporation; as such, the Post Office board has responsibility for the strategic direction of the company. While there was a clear need for new leadership of the board, we continue to have confidence in the other board members, who are experienced executives with a range of business expertise across the legal, financial, insurance, asset management and pensions sectors; there are two elected postmaster non-executive directors, too.

The Post Office faces unprecedented challenges. It needs to work at pace to deliver compensation to the thousands of postmasters who fell victim to a faulty IT system, as well as to continue the essential work to implement the necessary operational and cultural changes needed in the business. As such, strong and effective leadership of Post Office Ltd is a necessity.

Marion Fellows: I thank the Minister for his response. It is concerning that the Secretary of State's move towards clarity and better governance at Post Office Ltd begins with the Government being on a different page from Post Office Ltd on whether Staunton was fired or left by mutual consent. Will the Minister clarify that? Is it possible that Mr Staunton is being made a scapegoat to take the heat away from this Government, and those who came before, the Government being the sole shareholder in Post Office Ltd?

Back in July, the Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business said in a debate on POL's management culture:

"Through the shareholder's representative on the board, the Government oversee the Post Office's corporate governance, strategy, performance and stewardship of its financial and other resources."—*[Official Report, 13 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 180WH.]*

That is not the same as the chairperson. Are the Government satisfied that the UK Government Investments board representative has adequately fulfilled his oversight role? Indeed, has Tom Cooper, who stood down in May, been replaced? That is not clear from Post Office Ltd's website.

It is clear that the governance model simply has not worked. The arm's length approach used by successive Governments has allowed scandal after scandal to fester. The post office network is in disarray. Financial redress to postmasters is far too slow and, in some cases, wholly inadequate. The remuneration package for sub-postmasters means that many are working for below the minimum wage, and services are continuously being stripped away. Does the Minister have confidence that the removal of Mr Staunton will speed up financial redress for victims and bring about change in the management culture of Post Office Ltd?

Back in July, Mr Staunton appeared in front of the Business and Trade Committee over the bonusgate scandal. In a debate at the same time, I asked the Minister if he had confidence in the current management of Post Office Ltd. I received no meaningful answer, so has it taken a TV drama for the Government to take action? How is that acceptable?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her work; the all-party parliamentary group on post offices does a tremendous job. The phrase used in the statement was "mutual consent", but it is fair to say that the Government exercised their right to remove the chairman; the hon. Lady can deduce from that what she will. This is not a case of allocating responsibility for the past problems of the Post Office; we are simply saying that we need new leadership going forward. There were specific circumstances around the chairman that meant that we felt that he was not the right person to lead the organisation of the board at this time.

The shareholder representative on UKGI, as the hon. Lady was right to say, is not the chair; it was Tom Cooper, but is now Lorna Gratton. Do I have confidence in her? Yes, I do. I meet her regularly and have a high degree of confidence in her.

Compensation is too slow—we accept that. A number of measures were introduced prior to the TV drama, as the hon. Lady puts it, including the fixed-sum award of £600,000 for overturned convictions. We have also introduced a fixed-sum award for the group litigation order to expedite compensation. That is something on which I am absolutely focused on a daily basis.

I accept what the hon. Lady says about the remuneration of sub-postmasters around the country. Part of that, of course, is about consumer habits—where we shop on the high street. We are keen to identify new sources of revenue, including through the banking framework, which is a potential lucrative opportunity, and parcel hubs.

On the issue of confidence in the individuals, let me say that, having been a board director myself for 30 years, you are only as good as your last game, so it is fair to say that, at this point in time, we did not feel that Henry Staunton was the right person to lead the board.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Given the Government's role as the sole shareholder in the Post Office, and the associated liabilities and responsibilities that go with

that, when will the Secretary of State for Business and Trade make public all the associated papers related to Horizon and this entire scandal, so that the victims as well as the country can see where the responsibility for all this lies? By doing so, the Government will be able to take the right kind of action and support the victims as they seek compensation.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and the work that she has done on this. We set up the inquiry in 2021 to undertake that work. Those documents are public and subject to public scrutiny. She may have watched some of the inquiry sessions, which were very revealing about some of the conduct that happened at the Post Office. That inquiry is due to conclude by the end of this year and then report probably sometime next year. We will have a much clearer understanding then of who is responsible, and, as is often said at this Dispatch Box, that is the time to hold those individuals to account.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Post Office Horizon scandal is one of the most insidious injustices in our country. It has robbed innocent people of their livelihoods, their liberty and, all too sadly, their lives. At least 60 postmasters have died without seeing justice or receiving compensation and at least four have taken their lives. Twenty years on, sub-postmasters and their families are still suffering from the consequences and the trauma of all that they have been put through.

The scale of the scandal is so vast that getting the right leadership in place at the Post Office is of paramount importance. However, to decide to eject the chair during the weekend with no real opportunity to get the details of the decision on the public record is unusual, to say the least. People need to know that removing Henry Staunton was a substantive, evidence-based decision if we are to have confidence in that decision. Can the Minister assure us that this decision was, indeed, substantive and not just the result of a personal falling out between Mr Staunton and the Secretary of State?

The Minister has talked about setting a timeline “in due course” for replacing Mr Staunton. In the context of what has happened in the Horizon scandal and the big challenges facing the Post Office, strong leadership is vital at this point in the process. I hope that he will be able to share as quickly as possible further information about the timeline and when the post will be filled.

What confidence can the Minister provide that this change will lead to the wholesale culture change that is desperately needed to make sure that this never happens again? Mr Staunton was not in the Post Office during the Horizon scandal—he has only served in the position since 2022—and this scandal has never been about the actions of one single individual.

Finally, the priority for us all in this House is the fast-tracked exoneration of all remaining convictions and the delivery of rightful redress or compensation to all the affected sub-postmasters as quickly as possible. Will the Minister provide an update on when we will see more progress on those matters to make sure that we take urgent steps to fix the seismic damage of this scandal?

Kevin Hollinrake: It certainly was not something that we wanted to do on a weekend. There was a chance that it would come into the public domain by other means, which is why a conversation had to take place over the weekend. We did not think that it would be right for the individual to hear about the potential course of action by other means than the Secretary of State speaking to him. I think that was the right thing to do. I do not know why the hon. Lady would feel, or whether she any evidence, that there was some kind of falling out, as she put it; this was about very serious governance issues related to the person who headed the board of the organisation, which are obviously confidential human resources issues.

On the timeline to replace Mr Staunton, as I said, we will do so as quickly as possible. We are looking at recommendations as we speak, and we will report back to the House as soon as possible on an interim and a permanent replacement. This was not about holding somebody responsible for past problems in the Post Office; it was about the governance of the Post Office going forward. That is why a mutual agreement took place for Mr Staunton to step down.

We are working at pace to deliver the blanket overturning of convictions. We are keen to update the House as quickly as possible, and should do so in the coming days.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): As a member of the Business and Trade Committee, I was deeply concerned by the inability of Mr Read, the chief executive officer of Post Office Ltd, to answer an array of very simple questions. In fact, he appeared not even to have done his basic homework when it came to looking back at the Horizon scandal. Although he was not the CEO at the time of the scandal, what confidence do the Government have in Mr Read as chief executive officer to turn it around, and has he yet made public the board minutes that show when the matter was brought to the board's attention for the very first time? If any board member was complicit in hearing that information and not acting upon it, what steps will the Government take with lawyers to ensure that they are held accountable?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Select Committee. I was present for his line of questioning during that session. The chief executive committed to providing responses to the Committee; I am not sure whether they have been provided thus far. A number of questions needed to be addressed, and it is right that those answers be provided. As far as the Government are concerned, our primary means of achieving that is through the inquiry, which is hearing important evidence right now, and will conclude its work by the end of the year and report shortly afterwards.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Surely if ever there was a time to consider removing Mr Staunton from his post, it was after it emerged last year that bonuses were being paid to Post Office executives simply for doing what I think we would all expect them to: co-operating fully with the Horizon inquiry. I think that people will be forgiven for having the suspicion that, when it comes to Horizon, Ministers have been a bit like the Japanese moon lander, suddenly bursting to life as soon as a bit of light is shone on them, in this case by an ITV programme.

[Richard Thomson]

I have two questions. First, Fujitsu's representatives told the Business and Trade Committee a fortnight ago that Fujitsu had a "moral obligation" to contribute to the financial redress for the victims. Has the Secretary of State had any discussions yet with Fujitsu about how and when that might happen, as well as about the size of the contribution that it might make? Secondly, with regard to the continued unexplained shortfalls in Horizon, will the Government commit to revealing how much in excess the Post Office claimed back from staff, resorting to forensic accountancy if required?

Kevin Hollinrake: The bonuses were returned voluntarily by anybody who received them for that sub-metric, and the chief executive returned his bonuses from across the entire inquiry.

On the point about the Government picking up the pace because of the ITV drama, I would say a couple of things. We were putting a number of measures in place already. We had put in place the Horizon compensation advisory board, which has Lord Arbuthnot as one of its key members. A fixed-sum award was introduced last autumn. We were looking at advice on overturning convictions. Things were happening at pace in this area prior to the dramatisation, but of course we are public servants and members of the public. Of course we want to expedite things, and the impetus behind them is at a raised level because of the public outcry.

Conversations are ongoing with Fujitsu. In my view, the best point to negotiate is when we have all the evidence at our disposal, which will not be until the inquiry concludes. We welcome the fact that the company has taken and accepted some moral responsibility to contribute towards the compensation and we will take it at its word, but negotiating at the right point is the right way to deal with that.

The question of any excess moneys that came back from postmasters effectively into Post Office accounts is an important one, which we are asking now, and we hope to get answers in the near future.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I spoke recently to a couple of my constituents whose parents were wronged by the Post Office Horizon scandal. Now they are being asked to provide invoices from more than 20 years ago to prove that they bought the Horizon system—records the Post Office itself admits it does not keep. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is right that we focus on those who have been wronged, and that the benefit of the doubt must be with those postmasters who were completely wronged?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is absolutely right. It should not be the case that a postmaster has to evidence a document that does not exist. The benefit of the doubt should be with the postmaster. Of course it is fair to ask, "Do you have documentation to support any claim you are making?", but if the evidence is not there, the benefit of the doubt should be with the postmaster.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Leaving the Post Office rudderless now, when people are literally dying before they get redress, is not a situation we can put up with. The key question for the Minister is this:

where is the Bill to expedite redress for those who were wrongfully convicted? Will he commit this afternoon finally to making sure that we have pre-legislative scrutiny of that Bill so that it is as strong as it can be, and will he commit to a hard deadline enshrined in law in the Bill to make sure the payments are made as rapidly as possible? Frankly, Mr Bates and the other sub-postmasters who have been wronged for so long should not be made to wait a moment longer.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, but I do not accept his premise that the Post Office is rudderless. The chief executive is still there and I spoke to him a few moments ago, prior to the urgent question. As I have said, we are looking to appoint an interim chair as soon as possible and a permanent replacement shortly after that, and meanwhile the daily work of the board will continue.

On our commitment to overturn convictions on a blanket basis, I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's previous constructive collaboration and engagement with our Department, and I hope that continues. I am keen to engage with him on our approach. These are legal matters that need to be considered carefully and we had a number of meetings last week on this very issue, so I am keen to engage with him, but in a way that does not slow down the process of bringing the legislation forward. He will find us contacting him and knocking at his door in the coming days to talk about how we will go forward with that legislation.

I should point out that Mr Bates's compensation is not related to the overturning of convictions, because he was never convicted. That is not what is getting in the way of Mr Bates's compensation, although it is getting in the way for something like 900 other people, and we are keen to resolve that as quickly as possible.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to look at the Post Office's reported practice, under the former chairman, of making payments of just £5,000 under the Horizon shortfall scheme for distress and inconvenience to people it falsely accused of theft, when a similar claim made at an employment tribunal, in the most exceptional cases, is 10 times that amount?

Kevin Hollinrake: To be clear, those schemes are run independently of the Post Office. There are independent processes all the way through, and an independent panel assesses the loss. I think my hon. Friend is talking about the Horizon shortfall scheme, but it is clear that any tariffs that might go with payments are not a ceiling—they tend to be a floor. People should of course be fully compensated for both their financial and their non-pecuniary loss; that is a principle we have adhered to all the way through the process. We are looking at the recommendations of the advisory board on how to make sure people who have been through those schemes have received fair payments. In the group litigation order scheme, there will effectively be a minimum £75,000 fixed-sum award. We are keen to ensure not only that we get the money out of the door, but that that compensation is fair and seen to be fair.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Post Office bullied, threatened and lied to sub-postmasters and, as we have heard, there is huge frustration that throughout the entire compensation process it has tried to minimise

payments, or used extra-long and complex forms to avoid making payments to them. Is the Minister confident that the compensation programme is truly independent and that sub-postmasters will get the full and fair payments they deserve?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not accept that premise. I do not see any evidence of the compensation schemes trying to minimise payments. The independent panel for the Horizon shortfall scheme included Lord Garnier, for example, and seven or eight KCs—very reputable people seeking to do the right thing—so we must be careful in our rhetoric. Of course we want to ensure that people get their full and fair compensation. That is why we implemented the Horizon compensation advisory board, which includes Lord Arbuthnot, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), Chris Hodges and Professor Moorhead. They are decent people who want to ensure that people get treated fairly, and full and fair compensation is what people will get.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, in the wake of the Horizon scandal, there is a need for massive change in the culture driving Post Office management, particularly in its relationship with sub-postmasters, who are, after all, running private businesses under contract with—not owned by—the Post Office. Will the Minister ensure that whoever is appointed chairman commits themselves thoroughly to that culture change, and, if necessary, will he change other board members to ensure that we get the change that we all want to see?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a good point. In the past, the relationship between Post Office Ltd and sub-postmasters has not been where it should have been. It is important that that changes. There has been much work on this: 100 area managers have been appointed to help build that relationship, and some of the past conduct and culture of the Post Office has changed. However, we know that it needs to change further. That is the job of the board; we need the right leader of the board in order to do that—hence the action that we took over the weekend.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Poor leadership and governance of the Post Office led to the badly designed Horizon shortfall scheme, which other Members have referred to. I have to say to the Minister that there has been massive under-compensation of sub-postmasters, including my constituent Mr Pennington. For 10 years, he was forced to find shortfall amounts totalling a possible £100,000 because of the Horizon system. He and his wife had to use their own savings, sell shares and even jewellery, and remortgage their house twice.

The stress and worry of finding those shortfalls over 10 years was immense, and Mr Pennington had a mini-stroke shortly after selling the business in 2012 because he could not stand paying the shortfalls any more. Yet the Horizon shortfall scheme has paid out a paltry £1,500 for those 10 years of stress and worry, and has compensated only half the shortfalls. Even the tax top-up promised in November has not yet materialised. I have written to the Minister about that case, but what action can he promise now to ensure that my constituent is finally compensated for those years of distress to him and his wife?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to work with the hon. Lady on that particular case. We are clear that people should get full and fair compensation for financial loss and other impacts, including reputational loss—*[Interruption.]* I am setting out the position as it is. Of course, we are all concerned to hear about people who do not feel that they have been properly compensated. That is why we have the Horizon compensation advisory board, on which Lord Arbuthnot sits and to which I have referred a number of times. We are keen to ensure that all those people get, and can see that they have got, fair compensation. We are looking at the recommendations for an appeal mechanism, for example. I am very happy to look at this particular case in that context. It is absolutely the case that people should be fully compensated for financial loss and other impacts on their lives.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome what my hon. Friend has said. By taking this action, the Government have accepted by default that the arm's length body model for the Post Office does not work, so will he look again at the structure of Post Office Ltd, and will he confirm on the record that the former chairman, having left by mutual consent, did not receive or accept any severance payment?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, I can confirm that there was no severance payment. I do not think it is fair to say that we do not think the arm's length model works. Clearly, we have the right to terminate the chair's position, which is what we have done; that is part of the current governance process. Of course, individuals are important, and having the right individual leading the board is very important. We did not think that was the case prior to this weekend, which is why we took the action that we did. We are very keen to appoint the right person to help make the cultural changes within the Post Office that we all want to see.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Llefarydd. The effects of the Horizon scandal and Post Office business practices are still hurting our communities. The post office in Nefyn closed partly because staff no longer trust the computer systems, which I bet is happening in countless communities. I have asked the Post Office to provide an outreach van in Nefyn if no business at all is willing to provide that service—as appears very likely, because I have asked businesses; last week, the Post Office said no. Will the Minister guarantee the people of Nefyn that this, the oldest and second largest town in Llyn, will again have post services in the town?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to take that point up with the right hon. Lady, and to meet her to discuss it. It is very important that our citizens—our consumers—have confidence in the Post Office. That has certainly been the experience in my patch: people have been outraged when there is a closure, so the general public definitely have some confidence in the service. The Horizon system is being replaced. As far as I know, there has never been a case of a customer losing out because of the Horizon system, but I am very happy to meet the right hon. Lady to discuss her case in Nefyn.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Shepherd's Bush Crown office closed in 2017, and Hammersmith Crown office closed in 2020 after 100 years. Four sub-offices

[*Andy Slaughter*]

in my constituency have been temporarily closed for up to 10 years. With queues at the remaining offices stretching around the block at times, and a lack of competition thanks to multiple bank closures, will the Minister investigate why Post Office Ltd lacks commercial sense as well as integrity?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am happy to look into any cases that the hon. Gentleman refers to. There are clear set criteria: the Post Office has to maintain 11,500 branches nationwide, and 99% of the population has to be within three miles of a post office. The Post Office is maintaining its requirements under those criteria, but I am very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about the issue. Of course, we are looking at how to ensure that the network of individual post offices is sustained over the long term with new revenue streams, including through the access to cash legislation that the Government have put in place and things like parcel hubs. We think there is a bright future for the Post Office, but I am very keen to work with the hon. Gentleman to make sure of that in his particular cases.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I recently raised serious concerns with the Minister that the UK Government are not putting enough effort into making sure that post offices have a sustainable future—something that was of concern before the ITV drama shone a light on this issue. It is a challenge, and I do not feel that I really got an answer, so I am coming back to the topic again: we really need to know that we have a clear, proper plan for ensuring that there is no further deterioration of the network and to help build it back up. People in places like Neilston in my constituency, whose post office closed two weeks ago, or Clarkston, whose post office closed on Saturday, need those services. Those closures are billed as temporary, but they are only temporary if someone has the confidence to take up the opportunity to be a postmaster—who would feel that way now? What is the Minister's plan to address the issue and make sure we have post office services for all our communities?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with the hon. Lady. We need sustainable post offices, and that is about revenue. There have been changes in consumer habits and business levels, which have caused difficulties for postmasters. As I said, the Government have legislated for access for cash, which is a new opportunity for post offices. The banking framework delivers more revenue into those post office branches; we are keen to see that enhanced and for the Post Office to be more ambitious about that relationship, with that money flowing straight into the profit and loss accounts of individual postmasters' branches. There are many other opportunities, including parcel hubs and foreign exchange. I am happy to discuss the matter offline, if that would be helpful.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The reputational damage to the brand of the Post Office as a direct consequence of the Horizon scandal has been massive—as the Minister knows, my constituent Della Robinson was one of the 555 litigants who had their convictions quashed a couple of years ago. Looking to the future, what is the Minister's vision for reinvigorating the Post Office as a great British brand?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member, and I thank Della Robinson for her work. She was one of the trailblazers who were so important in getting to where we are today and to our getting compensation to the people affected. As I said in response to earlier questions, I believe the Post Office brand is not damaged; it is the centre of the Post Office—those who ran it from the centre—that is damaged. I think we should all get behind our post offices, and of course support them wherever we can. This is not about the brand itself. As I say, when I hear about any closures from colleagues or in my constituency, I know that the local populations are opposed to them, which identifies the high esteem in which people regard their post offices. I am very happy to have a conversation with the hon. Member, if necessary.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It has been very concerning over the last few days to read that a senior UK Government civil servant colluded with the Post Office to shut down the independent investigation by forensic accountants back in 2014, and that he did so with the full knowledge of the coalition Government. Now that the Metropolitan police are finally investigating possible criminality on the part of the Post Office and high-up employees, does the Minister agree that they should also be looking at the possibility of misfeasance in public office?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is certainly of concern to the Government as well. The inquiry is there to ascertain exactly who did what, or who did not do anything when they could have done something. The Met police will conduct investigations and take forward prosecutions wherever they choose. That is not something we seek to influence, although as I have said from this Dispatch Box before, I would welcome somebody being charged or criminal charges being brought against somebody for what has happened in this horrendous scandal.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The family members of a terminally ill constituent came to my surgery in Corkerhill on Friday; that person was a shopkeeper in the highlands who, like so many, were caught up with unexplained shortfalls in Horizon totals, and although that did not lead to criminal action, they paid up to avoid trouble—often borrowing from other sources to do so. Can the Minister tell us whether work will be done to ensure that we know exactly how much in excess the Post Office claimed through all Horizon errors? Can he also tell me in general terms how he will ensure that those who are terminally ill get the justice and compensation they richly deserve?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Member's particular case. The most important thing we can do is to get compensation to those people as quickly as possible. We have the first scheme that was implemented, which sounds as though that is the right one for his constituent—the historical shortfall scheme. I assume they have made an application to that scheme, and they should be compensated accordingly. About 2,400 people applied on time; 100% have received offers and 84% have accepted those offers. That is a route to compensation. On the excess, we are very keen to find out exactly where that money went, and how it was dealt with when it did appear in some kind of suspense account. That is something we are working on, but we are certainly keen to make sure people are compensated. It is the most important thing we can do right now.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When considering the governance of Post Office Ltd, will the Minister bear in mind the demoralising impact of the Horizon scandal on current and potential sub-postmasters, as well as on the people who were victims of the scandal itself? In our communities, we are fighting to return post offices to Shap and to Hawkshead—as he knows, because he kindly met me to discuss them recently—and to maintain a post office in Staveley, but we are being hampered by apparent inertia and administrative hurdles, in Shap especially, which are the last things we need. We need encouragement, not red tape. Is there a plan to proactively support current and potential postmasters, so that we can maintain and expand our vital post office network in Cumbria's communities and across the country?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, it was a pleasure to meet the hon. Member, and I am happy to meet him again to try to expedite matters if he is experiencing delays. Of course, checks and balances need to be gone through with any new postmaster application, but it is good to hear that people are coming forward, and I am very happy to work with him to make sure that that situation is resolved as quickly as possible.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

4.14 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With permission, I will update the House on the situation in Israel and Gaza.

Last week, my noble Friend the Foreign Secretary visited the region as part of sustained British efforts to end the fighting and build towards a lasting solution. This statement will also cover the International Court of Justice's decision on provisional measures, and the appalling allegations against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. As we debate these events, I know the whole House shares my horror at the heart-wrenching impact of this conflict.

One hundred and fourteen days on from Hamas's barbaric attacks, they still hold more than 130 hostages. Innocent Palestinians are suffering, with over 25,000 people having died, and hunger and disease spreading. The Government's end goal is clear: Israelis should be able to live without fear of Hamas terrorism, and Gazans should be able to rebuild their lives.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has led our engagement in the region and with partners to achieve that goal. Last week, he spoke to President Biden and met families of hostages, while my noble friend Lord Ahmad joined a Security Council debate in New York. The Foreign Secretary visited Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Qatar and Turkey, meeting leaders, Ministers, and other hostage families. The Foreign Secretary called for an immediate pause to get more aid in and to get hostages out, and for that pause to turn into a sustainable, permanent ceasefire, without a return to fighting.

The British Government have identified five vital steps for that to happen: a political horizon that provides a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution; forming a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza, accompanied by an international support package; removing Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel; the release of all Israeli hostages; and key Hamas leaders agreeing to leave Gaza. All those things are intricately linked, and we cannot secure one without all the others. There are also many other elements to consider, such as Arab-Israeli normalisation, security guarantees, and financing the rebuilding of Gaza, but we need to generate momentum now towards a permanent peace. That is why pushing for a pause now is so important, and why we need a Contact Group meeting, bringing together the key players as soon as possible.

I will now turn to the desperate humanitarian situation. The Government are focused on practical solutions to get aid into Gaza. We have trebled our aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories since 7 October, committing £60 million this financial year. In Israel, the Foreign Secretary pressed for changes to allow unhindered humanitarian access, such as opening more crossing points for longer and permitting deliveries via Ashdod port. He announced work with Qatar to get more aid into Gaza, with our joint consignment containing 17 tonnes of family-sized tents being flown last Thursday. Earlier this month, Royal Fleet Auxiliary Lyme Bay delivered 87 tonnes of aid into Port Said. Crucially, we are

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

supporting the United Nations World Food Programme to deliver a new humanitarian land corridor from Jordan into Gaza, which has already delivered over 1,000 tonnes of aid into Gaza. We know the desperate plight of civilians caught up in this and the suffering they are going through, and we will continue to do all we can with our partners to save lives.

I turn to the ICJ ruling and allegations against UNRWA. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that we had considerable concerns about South Africa's decision to bring this case. Israel has the right to defend itself against Hamas, and we do not believe that Israel's actions in Gaza can be described as a genocide. Of course, we respect the role and independence of the ICJ, and the Court has now reached a decision on provisional measures. It called for increased aid into Gaza, and measures to ensure basic services, as we have been calling for. It has ordered Israel to preserve evidence relating to allegations of genocide, reporting to the Court on progress within one month. It has also ordered the immediate release of all hostages, and reminded all parties to the conflict that they are bound by international humanitarian law. Those are points that we have been pressing consistently, and we will continue to press them after the Court's decision. For our part, Britain continues to engage closely with the Israeli Government on the conduct of their military campaign in Gaza. We have said that they must take greater care to avoid harming civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Finally, I turn to the very serious allegations about UNRWA first publicised last week, with further media reporting over the weekend. The agency is critical to delivering humanitarian assistance into Gaza and across the region. It plays a stabilising role at a time when we need focus on de-escalating tensions. The UK is a long-standing donor to UNRWA, as are our closest partners, notably the United States. Since 7 October, we have allocated a further £16 million to it as part of our response to the crisis. UNRWA's 13,000 staff in Gaza continue their working at great personal risk in the most dangerous circumstances: 152 UNRWA staff members have lost their lives.

The UK is however appalled by allegations that any agency staff were involved in the 7 October atrocities. We welcome the swift action that UNRWA has taken to terminate contracts while it launches an immediate investigation. We and several partners are temporarily pausing future funding until we have reviewed these investigations. We continue to fund vital aid delivery through multiple other partners, including other UN agencies and international and British non-governmental organisations.

This week, the Government's engagement continues. The Foreign Secretary and Lord Ahmad will again travel to the region. I am travelling to Qatar next week. We will continue to drive progress towards a lasting solution. As the Government have said, it is only when the prize of peace is more attractive than the potential benefit of continued conflict that there will be the chance of a better future. The time to start is now.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

4.21 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Last week, the International Court of Justice made an interim ruling under the genocide convention on the situation in Gaza. It was profoundly serious. The ICJ's interim ruling does not give a verdict on the case, but it sets out urgent provisional measures.

Labour has been clear that Israel must comply with the orders in the ruling in full, and Hamas terrorists must release all the hostages immediately, but I note that the missing Foreign Secretary made no statement. The only response that appeared was from a nameless spokesperson the day after the judgment. It claimed that the Government respect the role and independence of the ICJ, but stated that they had

"considerable concerns about this case".

Will the Minister give me a clear answer? Do the Government accept the Court's authority or not? Do they believe that the ruling should be implemented in full? If not, which orders do they disagree with?

While the Government prevaricate, Labour is clear that international law must be upheld, the independence of international courts must be respected and all sides must be accountable for their actions. That is why we will press for all the orders to be implemented alongside an immediate humanitarian truce and a sustainable ceasefire. The dire situation in Gaza must not continue. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of negotiations to secure a truce that will lead to civilians being protected, the immediate release of all hostages and a humanitarian surge in Gaza?

I repeat that aid getting into Gaza must surge, not stop. The allegations that a number of UNRWA employees were involved in the appalling 7 October terror attacks appalled the whole House. Anyone involved should be held to account by the force of the law. It is right that UNRWA has responded quickly by terminating contracts of staff allegedly involved and launching an investigation. Meanwhile, though, the humanitarian emergency in Gaza cannot wait. Twenty-five thousand people are dead, including thousands of women and children, 85% of the population are displaced and millions face the risk of famine. Will the Minister confirm that existing UK aid will continue to flow into Gaza so that current operations can continue? Will he outline a clear and fast path for future funding to return? We cannot let innocent Palestinians lose lifesaving aid because of Hamas terrorists.

Meanwhile, there continues to be a dangerous escalation across the middle east. We totally deplore the attacks on US soldiers. We offer our deep sympathies for those who have lost their lives or have been injured in the attack, as well as to their families. We stand with our US allies at this time of grief. The attacks are totally unjustifiable and raise tensions at an already dangerous time in the region. Iran must cease these attacks and de-escalate immediately. Labour has long recognised the dangers posed by Iran and its proxies. We have supported sanctions against Iran and have said for more than a year that, in government, Labour would proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, either through existing processes or a new mechanism to tackle hostile state actors. What will it take for the Government to finally act?

On behalf of our brave military families who sacrifice so much every day to keep us safe, will the Minister outline what his Government are doing to boost protection for the 2,500 troops stationed across the middle east? I welcome the Government's efforts towards a permanent peace. The situation in the middle east cannot be more serious. I must note that the Development Minister—as capable as he is—is not the main decision maker in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. When will the Foreign Secretary finally come to this House to answer questions at this most dangerous of times?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his comments, and I will try to address them all. Let me start by thanking him for his comment about British troops who are deployed in the region, particularly our naval personnel who have been on the frontline in recent days and weeks. I agree that their safety is a paramount duty of the Government, and he may rest assured that we take that extremely seriously.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked about my noble friend the Foreign Secretary. He will have seen that over the past week the Foreign Secretary has taken a leading international role in the region to try to move many agendas forward. In my statement I set out what the Foreign Secretary was doing. He has made it clear that he will be ever present and able to answer questions from Members of this House, and the right hon. Gentleman may rest upon that.

Thirdly, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the rising tensions in the region and the importance of de-escalating. He asked me, once again, about the IRGC. His points are noted, but I cannot comment on that on the Floor of the House, as he will understand. He talked about the importance of getting aid back into Gaza. All our efforts are set on that. He talked about the role of UNWRA; I talked to Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNWRA, about two hours ago, to check its critical assets in Gaza—whether warehouses, vehicles or stores—without which no aid can get in. We all understand that they are essential for aid delivery, but the right hon. Gentleman will equally reflect that, given the very serious nature of the allegations, it is essential that the Government pause to ensure that they cannot happen again.

Finally, on the ICJ, we welcome the Court's call for the immediate release of hostages and the need to get more aid into Gaza. We are clear that an immediate pause is necessary to get the aid in and the hostages out. On the wider issue that the right hon. Gentleman raised, we regularly call on Israel to uphold its obligations under international humanitarian law, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the update from the deputy Foreign Secretary about the Contact Group and progress being made. However, I am concerned that on 18 January in Al-Mawasi, a supposed safe zone in Gaza, the UK charity Medical Aid for Palestinians and the International Rescue Committee had their compound bombed by an airstrike from an F-16 jet. Thankfully, the four British doctors living there were only injured, although that itself is a cause for concern. A month before that, on 22 December,

it was confirmed via UK defence channels that the IDF had logged the co-ordinates of the humanitarian base and de-conflicted it, marking it as a protected sensitive and humanitarian site. I am gravely concerned that the airstrike still took place. Will my right hon. Friend please share with the House what investigation is being conducted, what the IDF's response has been and whether His Majesty's Government have seen the targeting permissions for that airstrike?

I raised with UNRWA the concerns of many colleagues back in November about whether it was doing enough security checks on staff. Is the goal of pausing aid essentially to force it to get its house in order? Is that what we are trying to achieve?

The ICJ's ruling was quite clear: Israel does have a right to self-defence, but it is not limitless. What are the Government doing to ensure that we are fully in line with the ruling and the six conditions placed on Israel by the ICJ?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for her comments. On the latter point, as I have said, we continually remind the Israeli Government of their duties under international humanitarian law. The bombing of the compound is an extremely serious matter, which, as she rightly said, needed to be raised at the highest level. It was raised by the Foreign Secretary in his meetings in Israel last week and, as soon as was practical after the details got out, our ambassador in Tel Aviv raised it as well.

On UNRWA, my hon. Friend rightly refers to the fact that the assets it had, which I described in my response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, are vital for the delivery of aid. The inquiry would normally have been carried out by UNRWA, but it will instead be carried out by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, which will conduct an immediate inquiry and report to the Secretary-General. We will obviously look very carefully at what it says.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Minister for prior sight of his statement. On Friday, despite concerted efforts to dismiss, ridicule and undermine South Africa's case, the International Court of Justice delivered a damning provisional ruling that ordered Israel to take all measures to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza. The ruling has left the UK Government with nowhere to hide, as they now have a legal obligation to protect Palestinian civilians—an obligation that should, at the very least, mean an immediate arms embargo on Israel. However, we all know that the best way to protect civilian lives, stop the killings and secure the release of the hostages is an immediate ceasefire.

The ICJ ruling also demanded that effective humanitarian assistance be provided to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in Gaza. Instead, the UK Government immediately chose to cut funding for UNRWA—one of the few organisations that stand between the people of Gaza and mass starvation—on the basis of 12 of its 13,000 employees having been accused of taking part in the atrocities of 7 October. If those accusations are true, it is absolutely right that action is taken against them and that they be held to account. However, by deciding to cut funding to UNRWA, the UK Government

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have imposed their own collective punishment on an already beleaguered and desperate civilian population, knowing with absolute certainty that that decision will result in the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians.

Can the Minister explain the thought process that led the Foreign Office to that decision? What cognisance did it take of the ICJ ruling, and why did it choose to ignore it? What assessment has the Department made of the numbers of Palestinian children who will die as a direct result of that decision? Finally, does he not see that, by continuing to arm the IDF, this Government place themselves on the wrong side of history, and that history will judge them accordingly?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman made four points, I think, which I would like to address. The first point was the importance of a ceasefire. He should be very clear that the Government want to see an immediate humanitarian pause so that we can get the hostages out and humanitarian support in, leading then to a sustainable ceasefire. I have explained our position. It relates to his fourth point, about how we ensure that this suffering ends and manage to get the necessary humanitarian supplies into Gaza.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the ICJ. As I set out in my statement, we respect the role and independence of the ICJ. I pointed out that the Court has called for increased aid into Gaza and measures to ensure basic services, ordered the immediate release of all hostages and reminded all parties to the conflict that they are bound by international humanitarian law. We agree with that. It is extremely important that those points are respected.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the cutting of UNRWA funding. We are not cutting funding to UNRWA; we are pausing any future funding. We have made the funding available and there is no funding due for the rest of this financial year. Clearly, future funding will depend on the result of the inquiries now in process.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): The ICJ has rightly dismissed South Africa's obscene demand for Israel to stop defending its people and instructed Israel not to stop, but only to prevent genocide, which of course it is already doing. Meanwhile, Hamas have been ordered to release the hostages, which they have not done. South Africa, whose crime rate is totally out of control, has meanwhile banned David Teeger, the young captain of South Africa's under-19 cricket team, because he is Jewish. Is my right hon. Friend concerned about the safety of Jews in South Africa in these circumstances, and will he consider changing Foreign Office advice on travel to South Africa?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. and learned Friend points—absolutely rightly, I believe—to the hideous nature of the charge against Israel of genocide, and I agree with him on that. On the release of hostages, which everyone has been asking for, I have read the reports of the meetings that took place in France over the weekend. It is still not clear whether significant progress has been made, but we all very much hope that it has.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the interim measures set out by the ICJ but refused to answer the question

from my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary. Does the Minister believe that Israel has a legal obligation to comply with the measures set out by the ICJ?

Mr Mitchell: The answer to that has been set out in the House on a number of occasions. Israel plans to act in accordance with international humanitarian law and has the ability to do so. That is what the British Government continually press upon the Israeli Government.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): We all share the abhorrence of what happened in October, and this House has stood behind Israel in its right to defend itself, but this conflict, which has lasted for far too many decades, will only be solved with a two-state solution and a proper humanitarian response, led by the Israeli Government. Does my right hon. Friend have confidence that that will happen? If not, what else can we do to put pressure on our friends the Israelis and say, "This is the only way forward for you"?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. We and our allies and friends, and virtually everyone in the region, believe that the only answer is a two-state solution, with Palestinians living behind safe borders and Israelis living behind safe borders as well. That is the policy of the Government, this House and the Opposition. We are pursuing it vigorously, as Lord Cameron showed in his many meetings last week.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister said that the Government did not support the reference to the ICJ, but that they support the outcome that justifies that reference. Given those mixed messages, what confidence can we have that he is communicating to his Israeli counterpart that the legally binding orders of the Court must be complied with?

Mr Mitchell: I have already set out the Government's response to what the Court said, but in response specifically to the hon. Gentleman's question, he may rest assured that those points were made by the Foreign Secretary throughout his extensive trip to the region last week.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): A pause in fighting, humanitarian aid and a long-lasting peace: all are needed to stop people dying now and in the future. I thank my right hon. Friend for setting out the five-point plan towards that long-lasting peace. I find it so frustrating that people who may be pro-Israel say to me, "There is no point talking about a two-state solution, because the Palestinian people will never agree to it," and people who may be a bit more pro-Palestine say, "There is no point talking about a two-state solution, because the Israeli Government will never agree to it." Does he agree that everyone should stop second-guessing what others will not agree to, and start working on what they will agree to and how we get there?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, and she will have noted that those are exactly the tactics that the British Government are employing. We are quite clear about the importance of the two-state solution, and we hope that when the political track is able to recommence—a moment that cannot come too soon—everyone will bend their sinews to deliver that result.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): No one is disputing the fact that Israel has the right to defend itself, but it must do so within the law, and that is what the ICJ has said. When the ICJ ordered provisional measures in the case against Myanmar, the UK Government welcomed the decision and asserted that Myanmar must do more “to protect the Rohingya.” In a statement, a Minister said:

“We encourage the government of Myanmar to comply with the provisional measures, which are legally-binding”.

Is this Minister prepared to stand at the Dispatch Box and say the same of Israel? Does he encourage the Government of Israel

“to comply with the provisional measures”,

and does he accept that they are legally binding?

Mr Mitchell: As we have made clear, we always emphasise the importance of abiding by international humanitarian law. At the start of her question, the hon. and learned Lady set out the two key points that were made by the ICJ, about the importance of international humanitarian law and the release of the hostages, and the Government strongly approve of them.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): When we talk of collective punishment, let us remember that it is Hamas who subjected the people of Gaza to collective punishment when they decided to steal aid and fuel meant for civilians, when they decided to embed their military capability in schools and hospitals in civilian areas, and when they made it clear that they intended to continue to attack Israel in the way in which they did on 7 October. Those are the people who have subjected Gazans to what is happening now.

As for UNRWA, according to today's edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, intelligence suggests that 1,200 UNRWA staff are actual operatives of Hamas or other Palestinian terror groups, 23% of UNRWA's male employees have taken part in Hamas's military or political framework, and 49% of all UNRWA employees have family members or other relatives who belong to Hamas or other Gaza-based terrorist groups. Is that what the money from the taxpayers of Brigg and Goole should be used for: funding groups who wish to murder not just all Jews in Israel, but all Jews in this country?

Mr Mitchell: That is why the Government have paused future payments. However, I should also make it clear that during my discussion this morning with Philippe Lazzarini, who runs UNRWA, I specifically welcomed the news that he will commission a totally independent review so that its conclusions will be unimpeachable. That means discussions with the US State Department, including US congressional interests, with the European Union and with the United Kingdom, and the engagement of respected individuals who might assist. It is that quality of investigation that is now required to satisfy not only my hon. Friend, but many others on both sides of the House who are extremely concerned about this.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Can the Minister explain what impact the review, and the time it will take, will have on the aid that is provided to people? I recognise what he has said about what will happen in the future, but it is important for us to understand what the humanitarian impact of this change will be while the investigations happen. Given his great

record of campaigning against genocide and for genocide prevention, can he also address the point about how the UK Government will speak to our Israeli counterparts to ensure that Israel follows the prevention order that is so desperately needed, as has been highlighted by the ICJ case?

Mr Mitchell: For many years, the hon. Lady and I have shared a deep concern about the question of aid getting through. I can tell her that while we are temporarily pausing any future funding of UNRWA while we review these appalling allegations, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that humanitarian aid gets into Gaza for the people who need it so desperately. We do, of course, work with other organisations: the British Red Cross, UNICEF and the World Food Programme, which has been essential in bringing vital supplies from Jordan into Gaza. However, as I said in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, the infrastructure that UNRWA has inside Gaza will always be fundamental to getting humanitarian relief to the people who need it.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I very much welcome the five-point plan, the call for an immediate pause in fighting and the contact group bringing together stakeholders. The allegations directed at UNRWA are indeed serious, and we should all welcome the investigation ordered by the UN chief António Guterres. I understand why countries including the UK have paused funding, but given that UNRWA is the primary humanitarian agency in Gaza, does the Minister agree that holding back funds for too long could see the humanitarian situation degrade further and lead to more Gazans joining the ranks of Hamas?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend, the former Chair of the Defence Committee, is right to focus on that issue. I also spoke this morning to Sigrid Kaag, the humanitarian reconstruction co-ordinator for Gaza, and she made it clear to me that while we have zero tolerance of these dreadful things that are alleged to have been done, we cannot operate at zero risks. The politics of logistics and distribution are a nightmare in Gaza, as my right hon. Friend knows. We will look carefully at these reports, and we will suspend any future funding until we have them, but we recognise that the UNRWA assets are essential to delivering in Gaza.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The ICJ ruling is incredibly serious for all sides. Can the Minister tell us today whether it is His Majesty's Government's analysis that Israel is operating within the measures that have been set out and, crucially, what consequences there will be if there is no observance of the ICJ's ruling? The Minister has told us for nearly 100 days now that we have been pressing for proportionate action in Gaza, but we have not got proportionate action in Gaza, so the question for the Minister must be: what are we now going to do differently to change behaviour on the ground?

Mr Mitchell: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we need to do things differently. We have been pressing very hard for these changes to be made. When he was in the region, my noble Friend Lord Cameron tried to advance the various issues epitomised in the five-point plan, which we are trying to

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drive forward. The right hon. Gentleman asks me specifically about the judgment on international humanitarian law. As I have said to the House before, we know that Israel plans to act in accordance with international humanitarian law and has the ability to do so. Clearly, these things are looked at all the time, but the judgments that we have made, which I have set out to the House in the past, remain current today.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Israel is much more than Prime Minister Netanyahu. What more are we in the US and the UK doing to encourage the moderate voices in Israel who argue for a definite democratic future for Gaza and the west bank? Above all, is there any more progress we can make to convince the Israeli Government that it is not in their interests to have any more settlements or expansions of existing settlements? It is the sense of helplessness among the Palestinian people that is fuelling this whole conflict, so what more pressure can we put on the Israeli Government?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend accurately says that there is a plurality of opinion in Israel. We strongly support, and say within Israel, what we think is the right way forward, which above all is a two-state solution. During the course of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visits, he was able to engage with President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority and assure them that there is a plan to push forward at the point where certain changes are made in the way that the Palestinian Authority is run, and that Britain will be there at their shoulder to assist when that moment comes.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The ICJ ruling is highly significant all around the world, despite the Government's opposition to South Africa even taking its case there. A few days later, when news comes out of the issues facing UNRWA, the UK Government, the US Government and others announce that they are withdrawing funding from it. I understand that the British Government's payments are not due until April. Presumably, the US Government have suspended payments immediately. The immediate effect on the most desperate people in the world—that is, the 1 million people around Rafah who are trying to get something to eat, water to drink and medicines to be cured with—is that they are not getting the support that they desperately need. Have this Government been in touch with the Israeli Government to demand that they adhere to the ICJ ruling? Will the Minister also tell us that, in light of the ICJ ruling, all British military aid to Israel has been suspended until such time as they abide by the ruling?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman will have seen the reports of the Foreign Secretary's meetings, including with Prime Minister Netanyahu, during his series of regional visits last week.

On the right hon. Gentleman's penultimate point, the Prime Minister spoke to President Biden on 22 January. They discussed the UK and America's shared deep concern about the terrible suffering and loss of civilian life. I have nothing to add to what I have already said about the ICJ's ruling, but the right hon. Gentleman may rest assured that we are very focused on the extraordinary degree of suffering that is taking place in the area around Rafah, where so many people are effectively kettled without either shelter or food.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What circumstances would change the Government's policy towards Israel, which is currently determined to oppose a two-state solution?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend reflects one strand of opinion in Israel, but he does not reflect the fact that there are many others. There is, not only inside Israel but across the region, internationally and at the UN, a very clear understanding that a two-state solution is the right answer. People may disagree about how we get there, but most accept that that is the destination.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let the House be in no doubt that article 1 of the genocide convention makes it absolutely clear that the UK has a legal obligation, not just a moral duty, to act to prevent genocide. While the Government are rightly fulfilling those obligations, in part, in Burma, they have allowed arms sales to the Israeli military to continue, despite the concerns of the Foreign Office's own legal advisers that the Israeli military's actions in Gaza are unlawful. Now that the ICJ's interim ruling agrees that it is legally plausible, under international law, that genocide is being committed in Gaza, possibly using arms sold by the UK, will the Government immediately suspend the sale of arms to the Israeli military?

Mr Mitchell: I make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that his interpretation of what the ICJ is saying is not the Government's interpretation, or indeed the interpretation of many Members of the House. I reiterate that throwing accusations of genocide across the Chamber, in respect of Israel's activities in Gaza, is extraordinarily offensive and, in my view, totally wrong.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): The Foreign Secretary, writing in *The Mail on Sunday* on 28 January, said how important it is to

"allow vital aid to get in to Gaza, where people are starving and disease is spreading."

Indeed, the provision of aid has been a key cornerstone of the UK's response to the current crisis in Gaza, as the Minister outlined, with £60 million of aid donated since 7 October. In the light of the recent decision to freeze funding to UNRWA, how will this aid be delivered? Following the review, what action is the UK expecting UNRWA to take to see the funding resumed?

Mr Mitchell: The action that UNRWA needs to take is pretty clear: it needs to make sure that nothing like this can ever happen again. I emphasise that we are not cutting humanitarian supplies to UNRWA at this time. We have paid up the money required for UNRWA to continue, and there is nothing planned until April—even before these terrible events, there was nothing planned until April—but we will review future funding in the light of the inquiry, which the Secretary-General will be receiving as swiftly as possible.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I echo and support the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). International law must be upheld and the ICJ's ruling must be implemented in full.

UNRWA has done vital work since 1950, and it supports refugees on the west bank and in Jordan, as well as in Gaza. UNRWA educates half a million children. The Minister mentioned the stabilising effect of its work in a very conflict-driven region. Following the suspension of 12 UNRWA staff, out of 13,000, and the rightful condemnation of their actions, will the Minister clarify the assurance that UNRWA operations will continue while investigations take place, and that ordinary Gazans will still be able to access that vital aid?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Lady's final point, UNRWA humanitarian operations, getting aid to people who need it, will not be fettered in any way by the British decision. She will be well aware that there are very significant logistical problems outside that, but the effect of the decision that we have made about suspending future payments does not affect the payments we have made already. I recognise the importance she attaches to getting more aid and humanitarian support into Gaza, and that is the absolute intention of the British Government.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister is right to reference the desperate plight of civilians in Gaza. One of my constituents, Dr Salim Ghayyada, is an NHS surgeon of 20 years and a UK citizen. He is terrified for his family, who are trapped in Gaza. Unlike other Governments, the UK Government are offering no help to UK citizens who have family stuck in Gaza. Will the Government consider a scheme for non-citizens, such as the Ukraine scheme, to help with this desperate situation—this plight for citizens in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: We have been working with partners to secure passage for all those who wish to leave, including British nationals and their families. We have helped to facilitate over 300 British nationals leaving Gaza. We are working with Egyptian and Israeli authorities to ensure that any remaining British nationals who want to leave but have not been able to do so previously can do so.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do apologise; I will now call two from the Government Benches. First, I call Dr Matthew Offord.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In November, a report by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education found that half of Gaza's 500,000 school pupils attended UNRWA-operated education institutions and that the Palestinian Authority curriculum taught in those schools is replete with antisemitism and encourages violence. The Minister says that he is going to suspend future payments, but the damage has already been done by decades of UK funding.

Mr Mitchell: I can tell my hon. Friend that, when I was previously in government, I heard these allegations back in 2010, 2011, 2012. I asked to see and have translated these school books, and I have in the past year raised the same point again. I have not seen any evidence of what he is describing. If he would like to give the Government evidence, we will of course follow

it up, but I must make it clear to him that both 10 years ago and in the past year no such evidence has been forthcoming.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Many of us have had concerns about the activities of UNRWA and the people who work for it. The excellent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) exposed the number of UNRWA employees who are directly linked to terrorist organisations, so what confidence can we now have that the aid we are providing actually gets to the people who need it, rather than being diverted by the terrorists that exist in Gaza? If all these people from UNRWA are actually involved with the terrorist organisations, perhaps they could actually do something about assisting with getting the hostages out of captivity.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right to make it clear that getting the hostages out is absolutely essential. He refers to the 12 people who have been identified, out of a workforce of 13,000. I can tell him that the head of UNRWA told me this morning that of the 12, two are dead and one is mismatched, so we are talking about nine people. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend makes the right point about the fact that this is completely intolerable. Inquiries have been set up, within UNRWA and the more widely held one that I described in my opening remarks, and we will wait to see what comes out of those inquiries and make our plans accordingly.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): In his answer to the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and in a number of other answers he has given, the Minister has said, "We have raised this with Israel", as if that were enough. What does Israel say in response to the question raised by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton about a known humanitarian base being bombed? What will the Government do to insist that Israel abides by the ICJ's ruling that it must investigate and "punish the direct and public incitement to genocide"? Will we just "raise" that?

Mr Mitchell: Because Britain is a close ally and friend of many in the region and of Israel in particular, we are able to have difficult conversations. It is perfectly clear that both the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have done so with the President and Prime Minister of Israel, and with a large number of members of their Cabinet. Those discussions have sought to persuade them to accept the need for a vast increase in the humanitarian support getting into Gaza, and to move forward towards the political track. Those are the ambitions and views of the British Government. Through our close relationship, we are able to press all levels of Israeli society.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the move to pause UNRWA funding, but the scale of the problem is much more significant than if it had involved only a handful of people, given the reports that 10% of UNRWA's 12,000 workers in Gaza are somehow linked to Hamas and other terror groups. A few weeks ago, it was revealed that a Telegram group used by 3,000 UNRWA teachers celebrated the 7 October massacre. Given those appalling earlier revelations, why did the Government not rethink our relationship with UNRWA before?

Mr Mitchell: As my hon. Friend makes clear, those allegations are abhorrent. We have always been aware that there are dangers in operating in the environment of Gaza. That is why this is one of the most inspected and scrubbed development and aid programmes that Britain has anywhere in the world. I hope he will be reassured by what I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) about the independence of the inquiry that is taking place, and the fact that the inquiry team will add to their number respected, independent people who will, hopefully, be able to give a useful judgment, and engage in the EU, the UK, and on the hill in America to ensure that we move to a better position.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Has the Minister seen the reaction to the ICJ judgment in Israel? There were reports at the weekend of a number of rallies at which Netanyahu Cabinet members said, “The ICJ makes judgments, but we make settlements.” There is now a call for settlements in Gaza, both in Khan Yunis and in Rafah. At the same time, Netanyahu is attacking the Qataris, even though, from most aspects, they have been playing a significant role in securing the release of hostages. He has also been refusing to engage in a discussion about the Egyptian peace programme. In reality, the UK Government have virtually no influence over Netanyahu; we should admit that. He will listen only to the Americans, so what discussions are we having with the Biden Administration to ensure that they maximise the pressure to bring about a ceasefire discussion and the release of the hostages and prisoners?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Government condemn the building of such settlements. He will have heard what I and others have said about the complete condemnation of settler violence, and the demand that the Israeli Government hold to account those responsible for it, put them before the courts and punish them. I will be in Qatar at the end of next week. I pay tribute to the work Qatar has done, particularly in trying to assist with getting the hostages out. On authoritative voices in Israel, I point him to the meetings that the Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, has had with Netanyahu. They have known each other for many years, and the Foreign Secretary was able to deliver some tough messages, which I believe will be heard.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Reports of UNRWA staff potentially being involved in the 7 October massacre—one of the worst pogroms against Jewish people since the holocaust—bring horror to many people, especially now that we are learning that up to 10% of UNRWA employees have some links with Hamas. I know that the Minister has said that there will be an independent review of UNRWA. Can he assure me that it will be independent, and that the UK Government will have input into it to make sure that the UN is not marking its own homework? If these allegations are true, what will we do about UNRWA? We cannot continue spending taxpayers’ money on funding antisemitic terror attacks.

Mr Mitchell: The review will not be a case of UNRWA marking its own homework. It has specifically accepted that it must be a different part of the United Nations, far away from UNRWA, that makes these judgments.

We will look very carefully at what inquiries reveal. I am completely with my hon. Friend on ensuring that nothing like this can happen again. I hope that the independence that is being injected into these inquiries will give him some confidence that we are moving to a different place.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): As others have said, the ICJ’s interim ruling could not be more serious, and it sets out urgent provisional measures that must be taken. I am sorry, but the Minister has not yet been clear on this point, so I will ask him again: do the Government agree that Israel has a legal obligation to comply with those measures? What role will the Government play in ensuring that within one month of the ruling, Israel submits a report to the Court on the steps that it has taken to comply with the orders, as it is required to?

Mr Mitchell: I think I have answered the point that the hon. Lady makes about the ICJ. Let me reiterate once again that we regularly call on Israel to uphold its obligations under international humanitarian law, and we will continue to do so in all circumstances.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The allegations against employees of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency were appalling, but UNRWA remains a vital source of food and support for the Palestinian people. I can already hear voices from the Conservative Back Benches that seem to be calling for us to throttle funding for UNRWA for the long term. Can my right hon. Friend advise us on what will happen between now and April, as regards his representations to the Chancellor on the Budget and contingency funding for this organisation after April?

Mr Mitchell: We will make our plans for funding known to the House in the usual way, but we cannot do so until we have seen the report and are clear that what has been revealed cannot happen again. Let me emphasise to my hon. Friends that the UNRWA infrastructure assets inside Gaza—the warehouses, the vehicles, the stores, and UNRWA’s ID system, which is used by the Israeli Government—will have to be used, regardless of who uses them.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): What steps are the Government taking, in line with their obligations under international law, to ensure the full and immediate implementation of provisional measures ordered by the ICJ regarding the protection of Palestinians from genocide, and the immediate provision of humanitarian aid and other vital services? Can the Minister confirm whether the UK will now end arms sales to Israel, due to the risk that they could be used unlawfully to kill women and children?

Mr Mitchell: We keep all arms exports under review. The hon. Lady will know that we have one of the tightest regimes in the world. Clearly, we will consider any impact from the Court’s ruling. In respect of the other points that she made, she will have heard what I said about the ICJ ruling, and indeed what I said about throwing around allegations of genocide across the House.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for updating the House, following a number of very significant and concerning developments in recent days. We should not forget that, in the midst of all this, dozens and dozens of families

continue to live every day with the anguish of knowing that one of their loved ones is being held hostage in unknown conditions. They do not know their whereabouts, or about their wellbeing or the conditions in which they are being held. Should not the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas be the one thing that every Member of this House calls for, following the ICJ report?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. He sets out the Government's position on the release of hostages. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) and I had the deeply moving task of attending a meeting at which we heard at first hand about the awful plight of the hostages. My hon. Friend may rest assured that the British Government, working with partners, will do everything that they can to secure their release as swiftly as possible.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) raised the dreadful, appalling issue of the targeted Israeli airstrike on the MAP compound—the compound of a British charity—in Gaza. On behalf of the National Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists, I would like to raise with the deputy Foreign Secretary the fact that almost 100 journalists have been killed in Gaza since 7 October. Their bravery has kept the world informed and exposed some of the appalling atrocities that we see daily. What does he plan to do to stop the deliberate targeting of journalists? I remind him that the ICJ ruling particularly says that we must, as part of its provisional measures, continue collecting evidence of breaches.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government, in particular through the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, have done their best to stand up for journalistic integrity, and the right of journalists to report on such circumstances; I strongly agree with what he said about that. On the bombing to which he referred, I draw his attention to what I said earlier: it has been raised by the British Government, and was raised as soon as practical by the ambassador in Tel Aviv.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has spoken at length about this country's relationship with Israel, and the powerful networks of advocacy that could work towards the noble cause of securing a ceasefire, a safe Israel and a free Palestine. Let us see whether he will use them today. Will he be clear that the Government, in their next conversations with the Israeli Government, will condemn the far-right Israeli Ministers who attended the conference this weekend in Jerusalem about the resettlement of Gaza? Members of Likud, including the National Security Minister, said that Israelis need to find a legal way to voluntarily emigrate Palestinians. Will the Minister of State also confirm that the UK will support the reported brokered deal by Israel, the US, Egypt and Qatar on the immediate release of the remaining Hamas hostages? How will the Government use our voice?

Mr Mitchell: On the final point, of course we are working very closely with the Qataris and the Administration of the United States to effect the release of the hostages. Although I cannot give a running commentary to the House, the hon. Lady may rest assured that we are

intimately engaged in that. She talked about our effect and reach within Israel. It is not just within Israel; it is in the whole region. The British diplomatic service has unparalleled reach, in terms of talking about the way ahead and the political track, and we are exercising it. On the rallies that took place over the weekend and the reports that she mentioned, the policies mentioned are not those of the British Government.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Given the mounting reports of evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Israel, and now serious recognition by the ICJ of the real risk of genocide, do the UK Government accept that the provision of weapons may lead to complicity in such a crime, and will they therefore immediately cease licensing arms and security equipment to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will know that Britain has one of the most effective and tough arms sale regulation authorities in the world. He may rest assured that its provisions do not change when it is dealing with Israel—or any other country.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The International Court of Justice is the world's top court and a leading body of the United Nations, and its orders are binding. It has called on Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent the killing of, or causing of serious harm to, people in Gaza, yet hundreds more people in Gaza have been killed since Friday's ruling. As a signatory to the ICJ, do the Government not have a legal as well as a moral duty to uphold, and not undermine, the ICJ's rulings, and to do much more to stop Israel's actions in Gaza? Should that not include suspending arms sales to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's final point, I have set out the position on arms sales and the regime that the British Government set up and support. I think I have also set out the Government's position on the ICJ very clearly, and I have nothing to add to what I have said.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am increasingly worried about the trend in this Government towards the casual acceptance of international law and international courts when it suits. That really is not good enough.

The ICJ interim ruling stated that article II of the genocide convention must be upheld, including ensuring the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza. Given what the Minister has said about UNRWA, and the fact that it is the largest humanitarian agency in Gaza, if the UK and other donors decide not just to pause their support, but to cease it completely and permanently, how are the Government and other international donors going to ensure the same capacity of humanitarian relief—and if they do not, are they in contempt of the ICJ ruling?

Mr Mitchell: I am not a lawyer, so I am not able to answer any of the hon. Lady's legal points—nor should I, across the House—but I can assure her that we are committed to making sure that international relief and humanitarian supplies get into Gaza. That is the burden of much of the discussion and comments that the British Government are engaged in. I discussed it with

[Mr Mitchell]

Jamie McGoldrick and Martin Griffiths, the head of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, over the weekend. We are doing everything we can to expand the ability to get aid into Gaza. On UNRWA, the hon. Lady will know that, while we have made it clear that we will not be making any further payments until the inquiries are completed to our satisfaction, nevertheless the funding we have already given to UNRWA is having an effect on the ground. We just want to make sure that it reaches the people for whom it was intended.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Earlier the Minister failed to answer the question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), so I will ask a similar question and give him another opportunity. Given the ICJ's interim ruling that the risk of genocide in Gaza is plausible, will the Minister suspend UK arms sales to Israel to ensure that UK weapons are not used to kill innocent Palestinians?

Mr Mitchell: On the subject of both arms sales and the ICJ, I have set out for the hon. Gentleman the Government's position. I am afraid that, just because he asks the same question again, it does not mean he is going to get a different answer.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Two months ago, I asked the Government whether they would consider providing specialist treatment for the wounded children of Gaza in UK hospitals, as is often done when there is a natural disaster or a cruel war abroad. The Minister responded at the time by saying that the choice was to increase in-country aid, and he referred to the increase of £16 million in his statement. Given the destruction of hospitals in Gaza and the dire state of medical facilities, will he reconsider that stance?

Mr Mitchell: We are considering whether we should join with the United Arab Emirates, which is lifting people out of Gaza, particularly children, and giving them support in the UAE. The hon. Gentleman will also know that we have deployed an emergency medical team who are looking at the situation there, and we would, if it was appropriate, deploy a field hospital—indeed, we would deploy it into Gaza, if that was practical and appropriate. On the critical subject of trying to ensure that we help all those who are hurt and wounded, particularly children, he may rest assured that we are looking at all aspects of that.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We talk about statistics as though they are not human lives: 26,000 men, women and children killed, 1.9 million people displaced, and a human catastrophe engulfing the people of Gaza. The five-point plan is great. We know what needs to be done. The fighting has to stop, the aid has to get in, the hostages need to be released, and we need to rebuild both the civilian infrastructure and hope for the Palestinians. However, there is one roadblock to a Palestinian state, and that is Prime Minister Netanyahu and the allies around him in government. They do not want Judea and Samaria to be handed over to the Palestinians for their state; they want the resettlement of Gaza. During his visit to see the Prime Minister of Israel, did the Foreign Secretary tell Mr Netanyahu that

his views on the creation of a state of Palestine and on a second Nakba are not just unacceptable and wrong but abhorrent?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman made the point about numbers as statistics, but those numbers speak for themselves—there will be no one in the House who does not reflect upon the catastrophe that has engulfed Gaza. He went on to set out a very eloquent road map for moving forward and for progress. He asks about the Foreign Secretary's discussion with Prime Minister Netanyahu. I think that that is a matter for either Prime Minister Netanyahu or the Foreign Secretary to reveal, but I can assure him that the Foreign Secretary would have been his usual robust self in setting out the position of the British Government. In respect of Prime Minister Netanyahu being the blockage, as the hon. Gentleman put it, to the ceasefire and to progress, I would point out to him that Hamas have made it clear that they are not interested in a ceasefire; what they want is a repeat of the appalling events that took place on 7 October.

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): According to Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, in just two days since the International Court of Justice ruling, at least 373 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli bombings and airstrikes, including 345 civilians, and 643 others have been seriously injured. Israel is already in breach of the order. What action are the Government taking to prevent the killing of Palestinians in Gaza? Will they now stop arming Israel, call for an immediate ceasefire and stop allowing Israel to act with impunity? Will the Minister tell the House what legal advice the Government have received in relation to ensuring that the UK is not complicit in acts of genocide?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady sets out with great eloquence the jeopardy and difficulties facing the people of Gaza at this time. I hope that it is of reassurance and comfort to her that the Government also recognise how difficult the situation is and are doing everything we possibly can to help move on to a political track and end the great difficulties that she sets out.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The ICJ's ruling is clear and specific, and respect for the international Court is of the utmost importance, yet in response the Minister seems to be saying simply that it is business as usual. May I press him again on what steps the Government are taking to ensure that the provisional measures ordered by the ICJ are complied with in full? What does he believe should be done to ensure accountability?

Mr Mitchell: I believe it essential that there is an immediate humanitarian pause to get aid in and hostages out, that Hamas must agree to the release of all hostages, that Hamas can no longer be in charge of Gaza, and that an agreement must be in place for the Palestinian authorities to return to Gaza to provide governance, services and security. That is the way in which we make progress, and that is the commitment and policy of the British Government.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Minister referred earlier to the extraordinary degree of suffering in Gaza. We need an immediate ceasefire to stop that

humanitarian disaster and get the aid in now, but such has been the level of destruction in Gaza that the need for aid work will continue for many months and years. When the Minister spoke to him earlier, did Philippe Lazzarini indicate, first, how long his inquiry is likely to take, and secondly, when the pause in funding will start to impact on the agency's humanitarian aid work?

Mr Mitchell: Philippe Lazzarini did not indicate a specific timeline, but I would be very surprised if it could not be completed within the next two months. It is essential that it is, because we and others need to make our plans to fund humanitarian relief, and in making those plans, we will need to decide what we are going to do about UNRWA.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is reported that the heads of the CIA, of Mossad and of Egyptian intelligence and the Qatari Prime Minister have agreed on a new hostage deal framework to put to Hamas. That deal would reportedly include the release of the remaining American and Israeli hostages in phases, starting with women and children, in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. Can the Minister inform the House whether the UK was involved at all in negotiating that framework, and whether the Government are using their diplomatic position to press for the release of all the hostages as soon as possible?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government are very strongly in support of the process that the hon. Lady has described, which took place in France over the weekend. I have heard the reports in the media about this matter, but at this point, I am not in a position to update the House authoritatively on its results.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will have seen the harrowing ITV News interview and subsequent video of an innocent Palestinian civilian brandishing a white flag in a so-called Gaza safe zone as he was shot dead in cold blood by the Israeli army. Does the Minister think that that constitutes a war crime, and what representations have the UK Government made to the Israeli Government about it?

Mr Mitchell: I have seen many videos of that sort, and my reaction is the same as the hon. Gentleman's. In terms of what the British Government are doing, as I have set out throughout this statement, we are intent on helping to ensure that the situation is brought to a conclusion as rapidly as possible and, in the meantime, that we get aid and humanitarian support into Gaza to help those who are suffering so grievously there.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The International Court of Justice ruling that it is plausible that Israel is committing a genocide in Gaza should have been the moment that this Government suspended arms sales to Israel and finally called for an immediate end to Israel's bombardment of Gaza. Instead, they are stopping their funding for the UN aid agency that millions of Palestinians rely on. The recent allegations must be investigated, but the Government's decision collectively punishes the Palestinian people and will lead to more starvation. In light of the ICJ ruling, what legal advice has the

Minister received that says that continuing to arm Israel while stopping funding for Gaza's primary aid agency is consistent with the Government's obligations under the genocide convention?

Mr Mitchell: First of all, we are not stopping funding UNRWA; we are not committing any future funds. Britain has been funding UNRWA and is funding it today, but in the circumstances, until the inquiries have been completed, we are not willing to pledge any additional funds to UNRWA at this time. In respect of the hon. Lady's interpretation of the ICJ ruling, I must reiterate what I have said: that understanding is not the understanding of the British Government.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Minister's statement is silent on the west bank. He will be aware of reports of increased settler violence, shepherds being forced from their land, the confiscation of livestock, the imposition of fuel blockades, and the arrest of Palestinian civilians who have been placed under administrative detention—that is, indefinite detention without charge. What assessments and representations is the Minister making regarding those serious reports that keep coming out of the west bank?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Gentleman will have seen, the British Government have condemned without qualification settler violence and illegal acts that have taken place on the west bank, and have made it absolutely clear that when such acts take place, those who commit them must be held to account, put before the courts and punished. In respect of the overall situation on the west bank, Lord Cameron was there last week and had some extremely good meetings—not just with President Abbas, but with others in the Palestinian Authority—where he sketched out a way in which Britain can be by their side and helping them when a political track is possible, and said that they should make the necessary reforms first, before that political track becomes available, so that they are ready to go when it does.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): On Friday, the ICJ determined that there may be plausible grounds that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. With that in mind, and with the case ongoing, will the Minister confirm that we will take the only serious options available to separate ourselves from the risk of complicity, which is to demand an immediate ceasefire, immediately ban all sales of arms to Israel—including ending assistance in the transfer of any arms to Israel, such as via the Akrotiri base in Cyprus—and ensure that sufficient funding is provided so that humanitarian aid reaches those people in desperate need?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will understand that the issue is not with providing aid, but getting it in. There is plenty of aid ready to go into Gaza; it is getting it in that is most important. She will have heard what I have said about Britain's arms regime. On the demand for a ceasefire, the British Government have set out very clearly that we want to see a humanitarian pause, the hostages freed and aid getting into Gaza, and then we want to see a sustained ceasefire. However, I draw her attention to my earlier comment that that is not something

[Mr Mitchell]

Hamas want to see. This is the policy the British Government will pursue—the pause, getting the hostages back and a sustainable ceasefire—with every sinew that we can bring to bear.

Teesworks Joint Venture

5.31 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): With permission, I would like to update the House on the independent review into the South Tees Development Corporation and the Teesworks joint venture, which the Government are publishing today, having received the final report last week.

Before turning to the specifics of the report, it is important that I remind the House of the significance and sheer scale of this project. Teesworks, in north-east England, is the United Kingdom's largest industrial zone. Remediating and regenerating the former Redcar steelworks is a highly complex brownfield regeneration opportunity, the alternative to which is a massive liability to taxpayers in clean-up costs and an annual multimillion pound bill just to maintain a highly contaminated site. Most importantly, as Michael Heseltine said in his 2016 landmark report on the Tees valley, the site is also part of "a much bigger picture", and one that provides an opportunity for regeneration that is unrivalled not only in size and scale, but in potential opportunity, as we are seeing with the development of the freeport. That is why it is too important to the communities of the north-east for Teesworks to be used as a political football.

Over the course of the last year, using parliamentary privilege, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who is not in his place, has made a series of allegations about Teesworks. This culminated in April and May 2023, when the hon. Member spoke, and I quote for the record, of the existence of "industrial-level corruption" and "dubious dealings". These accusations are about the most serious that can be made. If true, they would almost certainly be criminal.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister has just said that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) is not in his place. He should recognise that my hon. Friend has been through some serious surgery and has a proxy vote for the foreseeable future. Will he acknowledge that that is the case, instead of having a snide go at my hon. Friend?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I had assumed that the Minister had informed the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) that he was going to refer to him, so I had also assumed that the Minister will have known of the circumstances.

Lee Rowley indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: In that case, yes, the Minister might like to acknowledge that he recognises there is a reason why the Member is not in his place.

Lee Rowley: I am absolutely happy to acknowledge to all Members that the Member is not in his place for a reason. Equally, however, the Member made a series of statements previously and I am seeking to respond to those.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not really—[Interruption.] Excuse me, but I can handle this, thank you. That is not really what I was referring to. I was just

referring to the fact that there is a reason why the Member is not in his place, not the other points the Minister is making. Minister, do carry on.

Lee Rowley: These accusations are about the most serious that can be made. If true, they would almost certainly be criminal, and their mere existence threatens confidence in this immensely important, complicated and challenging project. At the request of the Tees Valley Mayor, an extraordinary independent review was launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to consider the allegations as well as the combined authority's oversight role. Today we have the answers to the primary question about the extremely serious charges of corruption and illegality—they are not correct; they are untrue. For the avoidance of doubt, let me repeat that: no corruption, no illegality. There is no evidence to back up the worst of the allegations repeatedly thrown at the local parties managing the project, no referrals onwards to other bodies for further review, and no substance to the most serious of allegations.

In addition, and at the Secretary of State's request, the panel has also made a series of constructive recommendations, including strengthening governance and increasing transparency. We welcome that oversight, as does the Mayor of the Tees Valley, who has confirmed that he intends, in principle, to accept all the recommendations relevant to him and his authority. For the two recommendations relevant to central Government, the Department will carefully consider how to support the continued success of mayoral development corporations across the country.

I know that colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and His Majesty's Treasury will also consider the recommendation regarding landfill tax. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today written to the Tees Valley Mayor, asking that he responds to the panel's recommendations, with an initial response within six weeks. My right hon. Friend will of course wait to review those proposals before deciding on further action, but the central point bears repeating: nothing was found by the reviewers to support the very serious allegations made.

This report has been a detailed and thorough piece of work, and I place on the record my great thanks to the three-strong panel for their thorough and well informed work over recent months. I thank Angie Ridgwell, chief executive of Lancashire County Council; Richard Paver, previously first treasurer of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority; and Quentin Baker, director of law and governance at Hertfordshire County Council. Copies of the review, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's subsequent correspondence with the Mayor and the panel, will be placed in the Library of the House.

Finally, I wish to remind right hon. and hon. Members about the rich heritage of Tees Valley. It has a proud industrial history and this Government are committed to giving it the proudest possible future, putting it front and centre of our mission to level up the country, and supporting all our regions to prosper and flourish by making sure that local people have projects they can champion. The independent review has cleared the Tees Valley Mayor and the combined authority of lurid allegations of corruption and illegality, and it has

recommended improvements that I am confident will be driven by local stakeholders. We are delighted to support a project that is bringing huge benefits to the people of Teesside and the rest of the UK, and for all those reasons I commend this statement to the House.

5.37 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank the Minister for an advance copy of the statement, but we know that a draft of this report has been floating around the Department since November, so why has it only surfaced today? How is it that the media were reporting the outcome of the report this morning, when it was only released by the Department at 4.20 this afternoon? Although we have only been given just over an hour to consider the 75-page report before coming to the Dispatch Box, it is immediately clear why the Government waited until the last possible minute to release it, because it is damning.

The issue has always been one of value for money, and on that the report shows that taxpayers' money was not being spent in the way the public should expect. Let me quote directly from the report:

"The governance and financial management arrangements are not of themselves sufficiently robust or transparent to evidence value for money."

On transparency it states:

"We found evidence of inaccuracies and omissions in reports which undermines decisions",
and

"We did not see sufficient information provided to the Board to allow them to provide effective challenge and undertake the level of due diligence expected of a commercial Board."

It also states:

"There is no oversight of Teesworks Ltd, despite requests from various combined authority members and Committees".

Finally it states that

"there is not a robustness within the system. Inappropriate decisions and a lack of transparency which fail to guard against allegations of wrongdoing are occurring, and the principles of spending public money are not being consistently observed."

Those are not minor, trifling concerns; they reveal a systemic and flawed decision-making process that hinders transparency and fails to show value for money. This scandal has exposed gaps in accountability, and serious questions remain about the lack of local democratic scrutiny throughout the process. It is now clearer than ever that that needs to be investigated by the National Audit Office.

It was an astonishing decision in the first place for the Government to ignore the calls for a fully independent investigation into the serious allegations that have arisen, not just from Labour Members but from the Tees Valley Mayor in question, three Select Committee Chairs and Members across the House. Even the NAO said that it was "willing and able" to carry out the probe. Instead, the Government hand-picked a panel to investigate only the most serious allegations.

I will ask the Minister three questions, in the hope that we can finally begin to uncover the answers necessary to draw this saga to a close. First, will he now refer the situation to the National Audit Office, not only to give the people of Teesside answers but to give the public confidence that it will never be repeated again? Secondly, will he assure the House that no one was prevented

[Justin Madders]

from providing evidence to the inquiry as a result of non-disclosure agreements? Finally, can he tell the House with confidence that the Teesworks project represents value for money?

Earlier this month, the Secretary of State, in evidence to the Business and Trade Committee, said that he wanted people

“to make a judgment on the basis of the facts.”

Well, these are the facts: a publicly owned asset has been turned into a cash machine for private investors, earning them at least £124 million so far. That eye-watering return required no investment and involved no risk on the part of private investors, and nobody else was given the opportunity to participate in the venture. The report does not change those facts—indeed, it confirms them—and no amount of spin from Government Members will change that, no amount of bluster will make this a good deal for the taxpayer, and nothing said today will change the view still held by many that something is seriously wrong in the Tees Valley.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his valiant attempt to try to move the discussion on. The basic facts are that Opposition Front-Bench Members asked for a review, and they got a review. They inferred that there were significant problems, and it has been proven comprehensively through an independent review that there was no corruption and there was no illegality.

The hon. Gentleman asked why the report only surfaced today. We received the final report last week. To support the transparency that hon. Members in the House seek, and the comprehensiveness they wish for, we have sought to get the report out as quickly as possible, and it is here today for people to comment on and to misrepresent if they so choose. It appears that some may choose to do so.

The hon. Gentleman quoted from the report. I am also happy to quote from the report. As I indicated in my statement, the serious allegations that were the genesis of the report have been proven to be incorrect. Where there are things that can be improved, that will happen, and the Mayor of Tees Valley has already indicated that he will do that. But it is important that we put this in context. The hon. Gentleman talked about governance, and at paragraph 22.3 the report says:

“The Board largely feel engaged and make unanimous decisions.”

At paragraph 11.3, it says:

“The Panel noted the largely positive assurances provided by internal audit.”

Paragraph 22.3 says that

“there is much that does follow due process”.

Most crucially, given that the whole challenge was about ensuring that the benefits of Teesworks come to the people of the north-east at the earliest possible opportunity, the report says clearly at paragraph 22.1 that

“much has been achieved in a relatively short space of time”.

That is thanks to the Mayor of the Tees Valley and the Conservatives in the north-east.

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I am pleased that the report has been published today and thank the Minister for his statement.

Teesworks is critical for my constituents and the whole of Teesside, and the report confirms that for every £1 of public money that has been invested, the taxpayer will receive £9.50 back, and that is on the basis that only 17% of the site has been developed.

As my hon. Friend the Minister said, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) alleged “industrial-scale corruption” in the House. He did so for overtly political reasons, which sadly Opposition Front-Bench Members have repeated today. Labour wants Teesworks to fail.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Nonsense!

Sir Simon Clarke: Labour puts politics before people, and the furious denials of the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) do nothing to disguise the fact that he and his colleagues have connived in making malicious allegations that this afternoon have been fundamentally proven to be false. The independent review confirmed that no illegality occurred. Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough ought to apologise to the House, and to all those who were named in the report and falsely accused by him? Does he also agree that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough should resign for acting against the interests of the constituency that he serves and, indeed, against the interest of the whole Tees Valley?

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend speaks loudly for Teesside and his constituency. I will take the steer of Madam Deputy Speaker and keep my remarks solely to the statements made previously. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough stated clearly, on 20 April in this place, that there had been

“truly shocking, industrial-scale corruption on Teesside.”—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 383.]

In the same business questions session, he repeated “industrial-scale corruption”. A few days later, in another business questions, he referred to “dubious dealings”. Those remarks have proven to be incorrect, and I hope that he withdraws them as soon as he is able to do so.

Alex Cunningham: I apologise for my outburst, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Will the Minister join me in congratulating Mayor Houchen’s partners, Musgrave and Corney, for pulling off the business coup of the 21st century? Without spending a penny, they secretly acquired 90% of the shares in Teesworks, which has had hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money invested in it. They have done multi-million-pound deals to lease it to others, including the combined authority, have made over £100 million in profit in just one year, and have secured control of the business development at Teesside airport when no one else got a look in.

That is all in the gift of Mayor Houchen, who, the report says very clearly, has failed on both governance and transparency—something I have said time and again. That is the accusation that I have made. Does the Minister accept that this is a terrible deal for the taxpayer and the people of Teesside? Will he now hand it over the NAO, as others have requested, so that all aspects of the business at Teesworks—not just those chosen by the Secretary of State—can be independently investigated?

Lee Rowley: Again the Labour party attempts to move the discussion elsewhere, and I will call it out every time. The report was set up because of extremely serious allegations of industrial-scale corruption, which have proven to be incorrect. The least that Labour Members could do when standing up to read their pre-prepared speeches is to acknowledge that they were wrong.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement, which will give my constituents the reassurance they need that Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen is doing things by the book and for the benefit of our region. The uncertainty and suspicion raised has been damaging to our region's reputation and to investment prospects. The whole Tees Valley has benefited from Ben's vision and leadership, which has led to jobs, investment and a renewed sense of Tees pride. Now that, thankfully, we have this report, does my hon. Friend agree that unfounded and scurrilous allegations should not be aired in this place? Does he further agree that Teesside is not well served by continually being talked down by the Labour party, and that those who have peddled damaging allegations should apologise?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend speaks up loudly for the north-east and his constituents. He is absolutely correct that this is a huge opportunity for the north-east, and about the transformative potential of Teesworks. He is also absolutely correct that it is the responsibility of all Members of the House to be cautious and careful in their language to ensure that those benefits are realised for the people who matter the most—the people of the north-east.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Over the weekend, when the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Sir Simon Clarke) and I appeared on the excellent local media programme "Politics North", it became obvious that Members on the Government Benches had an insight into the publication date and contents of the report, which Opposition Members did not. I am very glad that the report has been published, but to spin it as some kind of vindication of Mayor Ben Houchen is absolute nonsense. Given that is the spin that the Conservatives are going for, why will the Minister not demonstrate that Teesworks provides the value of money that he asserts by having an independent inquiry by the National Audit Office? The north-east gets little enough investment; we must make sure that every pound counts. Why can the National Audit Office not be allowed to demonstrate that?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; I have the greatest respect for her, and she provides immensely important contributions in this place. But she will recognise, I hope, when we move away from the talking points, that there has already been a review, which was already independent and has already followed due processes—the same processes, by the way, that were followed for Labour-controlled Birmingham, when the council there lost £1 billion; the same processes that were followed with Labour-controlled Croydon, which lost hundreds of millions of pounds and had serious governance issues; and the same processes that were followed with Labour-controlled Slough, when it did something similar. If those processes were good enough and independent

enough for Labour in those instances, when Labour was in charge of those authorities, why are they not good enough here? Is it simply because Labour is trying to make a party political point because an election is coming up?

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) clearly made comments that were not just wrong, but extraordinarily emotive and designed to do nothing other than undermine confidence in the tremendous investment work that has been done by the Conservative Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen. Voices in this place can be hugely negative and can roll over to become hugely destructive when things are said in the way they were said by the hon. Member—or, indeed, when they are not said. I just do not get Labour's position on business. NETPark in my constituency is fantastic; I have mentioned it more times than my predecessor did in the previous 12 years. Does the Minister think that Labour actually understands business, given that the Member responsible for this debate was on the shortlist to be the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—another example of speaking up for the north-east. He asked a hugely important question about the importance of business and private enterprise to our success and wealth creation in this country. It is vital that we support business in order to make the wealth that allows us to support the public services we all need. The transformative opportunities of things like Teesworks will ensure that the north-east has those public services and the taxpayer revenue needed to support them in the coming years and decades.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The report was published in November '23—published in nearly February '24. Can the Minister explain the delay? I must say, there are suspicions that the report has been diluted. Can the Minister say whether the report has been altered because of discussions or communications between the author and the Government? Will he ensure—for the sake of transparency—that all communications between the author and the Department are published?

Lee Rowley: If I have misheard the hon. Gentleman, I apologise in advance, but I am pretty sure that he just said that the report was published in November 2023. That was not the case. The report was received by the Department last week, and we have published it within a week of receipt.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I wish to inform you that in line with the convention of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I informed the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) that I would be raising this matter, and we had quite an interesting exchange of text messages—but suffice it to say I wish him a speedy recovery.

I have to say, however, that the hon. Gentleman does have previous form on this issue. First, he ignored scientific evidence to try to prevent dredging in connection with the freeport development, and today we discover he has levelled vile, unfounded accusations of corruption and dishonesty at the Tees Valley Mayor. Does the Minister agree that jobs and economic development are more important to the people of Teesside—including

[Sir Robert Goodwill]

those who live in Middlesbrough, incidentally—than scoring political points on the basis of incorrect and unfounded allegations? Does he share my disappointment that rather than apologising on behalf of their colleague, the Opposition Front Benchers are doubling down on some of these allegations, which have now been blown completely out of the water by the report?

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: the report in front of us says explicitly that the accusations levelled at this project are not true. It is beholden on Members in this place, when they get things wrong, to say that that is the case; and it is vital that we ensure that this project gets going, keeps going, accelerates even further and gets the benefits for Tees Valley as soon as possible.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The report says:

“We did not see sufficient information provided to Board to allow them to provide effective challenge and undertake the level of due diligence expected of a commercial Board”?

Does the Minister think that is acceptable? Can he expect the people of Teesside to have confidence that decisions being taken in this way are in their best interests or will deliver best value for money? Is it not time to get the National Audit Office to look at the matter?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady needs to ensure that when she quotes from that report, she does so with completeness. It is also the case that paragraph 4.8 of the report says:

“we have sufficient evidence and consistency of views to form our conclusions as set out in the report.”

The hon. Lady was in this place a few months ago saying that the report would not be sufficient and referring to the pretence of an “independent” inquiry, which she is now quoting from. Labour Members cannot have it both ways. They cannot say that the inquiry does not work and then, when conclusions come out that they do not like, seek to disregard them.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): May I pass on my best wishes for a speedy recovery to the good and hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), and commend his bravery in raising this issue? Clearly, the Minister does not like use of the C-word, but he will be telling us next that the personal protective equipment contracts represented good value for money and that no dubious practice was involved in the awarding of those contracts—stretch the truth thin enough and people start to see through it.

I want to ask about value for money and scrap. Apparently, there are 500,000 tonnes of scrap metal on the site. Sales have so far raised £90 million, with £45 million going straight to private developers Musgrave and Corney, without any risk or investment themselves. How on earth does that represent good value for money? Will the Minister or the Secretary of State instruct the National Audit Office to begin a full value for money investigation into the goings-on at the Teesworks site?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Gentleman, again, is inferring continued corruption. This report said—

Grahame Morris: I did not!

Lee Rowley: The hon. Gentleman said “the C-word”. That is inferring corruption, which has been absolutely comprehensively disproven in this report. The hon. Gentleman then went on to talk about value for money and the financial position, which is important. It is vital we put on record that the liability of this site—a massive site, which had liabilities in the hundreds of millions of pounds, if not more, and was costing the best part of £20 million a year just to keep in its dirty state prior to any clean-up—was falling on the taxpayer in the main.

The only reason these changes and the joint venture have been brought forward is to transform the area for the good of the area in the long term. I note, once again, what happens when Labour Members do not like a report that they called for—when it does not have the conclusions that they asked for and does not get to the place they wanted it to. What do they do? They just call for another one.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am glad to hear that nothing illegal has happened, but sometimes in this world it is what is legal that really shocks us. Like me, the Minister probably remembers that when the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities came before the Business and Trade Committee, he said that this freeport was a flagship for the policy. Yet paragraph 1.7 of the report concludes:

“a number of decisions taken by the bodies involved do not meet the standards expected when managing public funds.”

The firm was allowed to buy 100 acres of land at £1 an acre; it was given rights to sell scrap metal of £50 million; it then went on to sell the lease it had for, I think, about £93 million; and it has booked £124 million of profit in the course of two years. Surely there are lessons to be drawn about how we absolutely maximise value for money in what is still a novel and important policy. It is for that reason that it would benefit all of us in this House if the NAO was allowed to get to the bottom of the question of how we ensure that profits like these are not just extracted from the taxpayer.

Lee Rowley: The right hon. Gentleman has clearly read some of the report. I just want to draw his attention to some other elements of it. Paragraph 12.7 states:

“The project is described as the largest regeneration project undertaken in the UK covering thousands of acres of land. The project is complex and the JV between the public and private sectors brings the inevitable cultural tensions between the desire to move at pace unencumbered by bureaucracy as opposed to the expectations of accountability and transparency”.

The report itself says that there was a debate to be weighed up on that, but it also states in paragraph 6.14, on the very point about the involvement of business and regeneration, that there was “no obvious viable commercial” proposition for regenerating part of the land, and that the joint venture

“was critical to being able to reach agreement with the Thai Banks” to start it in the first place. It was necessary, it has been done, and it will be transformative for the people of Tees Valley.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister talks about this being a complex project, but I am not quite sure exactly how complex it is. As I see it, Teesworks reported a turnover of £143 million, on which it made a £50 million profit—a 35% return. The only similar return I have seen recently was Baroness Mone’s,

for her personal protective equipment. Given the scale of what I think is a scandal and many view as a scandal, the public expect the NAO to undertake an independent report. I admire the Minister's conviction, but will he not support an independent NAO report to corroborate and validate his own?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Gentleman appears to be questioning whether the site is complex. These are not my words, but the words of the review, which many of his colleagues have used, often out of context in the past half an hour, to throw accusations around the place. He stood up once before, on 7 June 2023, to indicate that he thought the project was "a scam". He was not choosing his words carefully then and he is not choosing his words carefully now. He should consider whether he wants to withdraw any of them.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am choosing my words carefully. For past similar projects we have had NAO investigations after the event. Many of us have been disappointed by our own decision-making process of not producing reports soon enough. The issue here is that there are potential allegations of excess profits, so would it not be better to have the NAO vet the project with regard to excess profits at this stage, rather than run the risk of trying to learn lessons after the event?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing that up. I repeat that we have just had an independent inquiry—an independent inquiry which went through a process that the Labour party, when last in government, set up. If the Labour party is so desperate to have an independent inquiry into the Tees Valley after one has already been completed, I would love to hear from them where their calls are for independent inquiries into Birmingham, Croydon, Slough and Liverpool, all areas where mistakes have been made by Labour administrations but which they do not want to talk about.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The report into the Teesworks joint venture highlights gaps in the oversight and accountability of mayoral development corporations and such joint ventures. Given that the mechanisms of mayoral development corporations are being rolled out across England, will the Minister say what thoughts he and his Department have given to greater scrutiny and probity not just of the work of metro mayors, but in particular of the work of mayoral development corporations?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. Mayors and mayoral development corporations have the potential to be transformative for their areas, and both Conservative and Labour mayors have clearly made significant progress on that over the past decade or so. As I said in my opening remarks, we will carefully consider the recommendation that has been brought forward for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but it is absolutely important to remember—I will say it once more for the avoidance of doubt—that the charge was corruption and illegality and that has been proven to be incorrect. The report states that it is incorrect, and it is important that that is on the record and repeated again and again and again.

Points of Order

6.4 pm

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Parliamentary privilege is one of the most important and sensitive rights that we in this House exercise, and it is one that we need to do so with the utmost care. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) has, as we have heard during the course of this afternoon's statement, made allegations of "industrial-scale corruption". They are in *Hansard* on 20 April 2023. These are allegations that he took great care not to repeat outside this House, because he knew full well that that would expose him to legal action. What processes exist, now that the report has comprehensively established that the allegations were untrue, to require the hon. Member to return to this House and correct the record? I believe it fundamentally undermines the entire principle of parliamentary privilege if the words we use in this House, under that ancient right, can be used lightly, or indeed maliciously, for political ends.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Parliamentary privilege is exactly what it says on the can: it is a privilege that must be used wisely, not recklessly or for political means. Will Mr Speaker review the use of parliamentary privilege in this case, where there could be, I suspect, a degree of political motivation to make allegations which, as my right hon. Friend said, were not repeated outside the House? What further guidance might colleagues be given in light of this situation?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Gentlemen for their points of order. First of all, I should say that the Chair is not responsible for what Members say in the Chamber, or whether they choose to correct it, unless a speech is against the rules of the House. We do not accuse others of malicious remarks. I think the best thing I can do is remind Members of what Mr Speaker said at the beginning of this Session, which I feel will answer the points they have raised. He said:

"The House asserts its privilege of freedom of speech...It is there to ensure that our constituents can be represented by us without fear or favour. It is an obligation upon us all to exercise that privilege with responsibility...The Speaker does not have the power to police the accuracy of Members' contributions, including those of Ministers. It is therefore incumbent on Members to be accurate in what they say in this House, but if a Member is inaccurate by mistake, they should correct that mistake as soon as possible."—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2023; Vol. 740, c. 2.]

That is what Mr Speaker said earlier in the Session about this very issue.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted to ask you to confirm that Members are still entitled to speak out on matters that they believe are correct. Is it in order for Conservative Members to continue to raise issues about an individual Member when they know that they are not here and are not capable of attending because of illness?

Madam Deputy Speaker: To the first point, I think what I said clarifies the position. I think I made it clear at the beginning of the statement that I would hope that Members who refer to another hon. Member would apprise them of the fact that they are going to do so. I notice that Sir Robert Goodwill made a point of saying that. I assume that others have done so, too. Obviously, if an hon. Member cannot be here, it does not mean that they can never be referred to, as long as they have been given adequate notice. I hope that that is helpful.

Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 21 November 2023, on UK trade policy: food and agriculture, HC 162.]

6.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Government are proud to champion free trade at every opportunity. We recognise the power and potential of free and fair trade to ease the cost of living, lower prices and extend consumer choice, all of which drives growth across all four nations of our United Kingdom. As exemplified by the free trade agreements that we recently brought into force with Australia and New Zealand, it is UK businesses and UK consumers who benefit when burdensome red tape is cut, greater market access is secured, and trade flows more freely. The UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership will help us to realise these benefits with 11 countries spanning the Americas and Asia.

As Members will know, this partnership covers a vast area of the globe—500 million people—which already accounts for well over £100 billion-worth in UK trade. Our accession will boost this flow of goods and services even further, leaving more than 99% of UK products eligible for zero tariffs. This matters, because we sell more to CPTPP countries than we do to France and Italy combined. As we join, the partnership will have a combined GDP of roughly £12 trillion in 2022 figures, equivalent to nearly 15% of the world's total. It will also provide a gateway to the wider Indo-Pacific region, which is set to account for the majority of global economic growth by 2050.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that our leaving the European Union has made it possible to secure these deeper economic and diplomatic ties with some of the fastest growing economies in the world, and that it is only because of the decisions made by this Government that we are now getting on with that job?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend is correct. We would not have been able to sign this agreement had we not left the European Union, but we are now able to enjoy the benefits of this free trade agreement as well as the one that we have with the European Union.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Many of the figures that are sometimes cited about the future size and scope of the Indo-Pacific market include the size and growth of China. Has the Secretary of State reflected further on the evidence that she gave to the Select Committee last week, and can she tell the House whether, if China decides to try to join the CPTPP and meets the technical standards, the UK will block that or welcome it?

Kemi Badenoch: The right hon. Gentleman knows what I said to the Committee. It is important to stress the principle that these are not decisions that the UK makes in isolation, but he will hear more about the arguments relating to accession later in my speech.

One of the major benefits of our accession is the fact that for the first time we will have a trade deal with Malaysia and Brunei—economies worth over £340 billion in GDP. What does that mean for British business? It means, for example, that tariffs on British-made cars exported to Malaysia will be cut from 30% to zero, and that our whisky exporters will see tariffs cut from 80% to zero, a move that has been widely welcomed by members of the Scotch Whisky Association.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State has spoken about the size of this deal, and she has mentioned the major players in our markets, the automotive and whisky industries, which are of course very big exporters. Will she say a little about the opportunities that may exist for small and medium-sized enterprises, and the work that is being done to open up those opportunities to them?

Kemi Badenoch: There will be a multiplicity of benefits for small businesses—for instance, the tariffs to which I have referred—but the agreement also contains a chapter that was specifically intended to help SMEs to take advantage of it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State mentioned car exports to Malaysia. That, of course, will not make up for the millions of pounds that we now risk losing because of the suspension of the deal with Canada for the automotive industry. The Bill will do nothing to tackle that, because it is based on the accumulation of EU content that we need. Will the Secretary of State tell us what on earth she will do to fight for British car makers, given that we shall now have the worst of all worlds, and we are not even part of a “Canada-style deal” with Canada?

Kemi Badenoch: First, Canada is part of the CPTPP. Secondly, the rules of origin, to which the hon. Lady was referring, have still not been fully decided; that will come in March. We are working with our counterparts in Canada. I think the hon. Lady was confusing the discussions on rules of origin with discussions on cheese, which is an entirely different issue.

UK companies will enjoy greater market access in some of the nine countries with which we already have bilateral agreements. Let us take Mexico. Under our current bilateral agreement, chocolate producers must pay a tariff of about 25%, but on accession that will drop to zero. We also said at the outset of our negotiations that we would like our businesses to benefit from the key trade quotas that this agreement offers. I am pleased to tell the House that we have secured access to those quotas as part of our negotiations. That means, among other things, that we have secured better access for UK dairy producers selling to Canada, Japan and Mexico, and it probably explains why Minette Batters, the president of the National Farmers Union, has said that the agreement could provide

“good opportunities to get more fantastic British food on plates overseas.”

I am sure that all Members here today would warmly welcome such an outcome.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State and the Government for the stance that they have taken with our friends and allies in Canada, namely that the UK will not permit the import of hormone-treated beef. It is important that we can be a beacon to the rest of the world in that regard. Can the Secretary of State reaffirm to the House and the country that we will stand firm in continuing to prohibit the import of not only hormone-treated beef, but ractopamine-treated pork and chlorine-washed poultry? It is vital that we uphold animal health and welfare standards, as well as helping to protect public health.

Kemi Badenoch: I am happy to confirm that that is the case. We are now in a position to make our own decisions on what we do with trade agreements. We have said that we will never compromise on animal welfare or environmental standards, and we continue to regulate. The difference between this deal and the kind of deal that we had previously with the EU is that we did not then have complete freedom to regulate.

Another notable benefit concerns rules of origin. Joining this partnership will mean that content from any CPTPP country can be counted as qualifying when goods are exported within the trading bloc, and that has the potential to benefit our innovative British-based manufacturers, including our car industry. In the automotive sector we have an exceptionally competitive global market, especially as we make the transition to electric vehicles. Critical minerals are needed for their production, and those are inevitably difficult to source in a global supply chain. It is therefore essential to the success of our industry that more countries recognise where a component is made and accept it as part of one supply chain.

For example, say one of our big automotive manufacturers in the west midlands ships a part to Mexico for additional assembly, and that part is then sent on to another CPTPP country, such as Japan, for final manufacturing. Post accession, the parts made in the west midlands will meet the agreement’s rules of origin. That is a real incentive for CPTPP countries to purchase more British-designed, British-made products, and it is part of the reason why our future accession to this partnership has been so warmly welcomed by the sector. Mike Hawes, chief executive officer of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, has said that the agreement makes “*eminence* sense” and has the potential to deliver opportunities for the automotive industry.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is good to hear from Mike Hawes and to learn what he thinks, but can the Secretary of State give the House some indication of what contribution the CPTPP will make to our GDP?

Kemi Badenoch: According to the models and estimates, it will be £2 billion a year, but it all depends on which countries choose to accede and how many businesses in the UK choose to take advantage of the agreement. A free trade agreement utilisation programme will therefore be critical to our gaining the greatest possible benefits from the CPTPP.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): There is a great deal of argument about where the opportunity for UK exporters is. Does my right hon. Friend agree with the

[Mark Garnier]

prediction that the 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations will create a bigger trading bloc and a bigger economic unit than the European Union by 2050, and does she agree that the CPTPP offers the opportunity for countries such as the Kingdom of Thailand, which is not a member, to join in the future? Surely the CPTPP is not about what it is now, but what it will be in the future.

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This deal is thinking about the future. Of course we have a close trading relationship with the European Union, but the fact is that, as a share of global growth, Europe is shrinking and other parts of the world are growing. This is our opportunity to get in early and help shape the rules for this trading bloc.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Business Secretary is making a powerful case on why accession to the CPTPP will be transformative for our country in so many ways. She alluded to the importance of business with Malaysia. This is not just about trade; it is also about investment. The importance of Malaysian investment over here is symbolised by Brabazon on the edge of Bristol, and by Battersea power station. Does she agree that all those investments will be much more secure under the umbrella of the first ever trade and investment agreement with Malaysia?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with that statement. I would just like to highlight the significant contribution that our trade envoys, including my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), are making to our debate on trade. They are getting out there, bringing business to the United Kingdom, selling all that is great about our country, and making a valuable contribution to trade policy in the UK, and I want to take this opportunity to thank them for all the work they are doing, travelling around the world and banging the drum for British trade.

Liam Byrne: Before the Secretary of State moves off the subject of cars, I want to make an intervention about our trade with Canada, which involves more than £745 million-worth of exports. We currently benefit from tariff-free trade because of the extended accumulation of origin rules. That tariff break will end at the end of March, and because talks have broken down, we face a situation where our car exports are about to be hit by tariffs. Can she tell the House a bit more about how she plans to avoid a tariff war hitting UK car exports at the end of March?

Kemi Badenoch: This is a good opportunity for me to state explicitly that the talks have not broken down. We are having multiple discussions with Canada on cheese, in which we have not come to an agreement. However, the quota that we have under CPTPP with Canada is 16.5 kilotonnes, which is more than the 2 kilotonnes we are selling to Canada at the moment, so we are not particularly concerned about that, although it is disappointing. We have an ongoing rules of origin discussion, and we have an FTA discussion, which I have paused, for reasons that the right hon. Gentleman will know—

Liam Byrne indicated dissent.

Kemi Badenoch: Well, he should know them, because I believe I referred to them in the Select Committee; I hope he was listening. The point I am making to the Chair of the Select Committee is that trade is dynamic. On some issues that we are negotiating and discussing with our partners, we have differences of opinion; and others are going swimmingly. This is not a reason for us to cast aspersions on our trade relationships with the countries in question.

Joining this partnership will deliver for our manufacturers, but crucially it will also deliver for our globally renowned services sector. The UK is already the world's second largest exporter of services, behind only the US, and services exports are at record levels. CPTPP, with its modern and ambitious rules on services and digital trade, plays to the UK's strengths, given that almost 80% of our economy is services-based. It will reduce market access barriers, such as data localisation requirements; British businesses will not have to set up costly servers or data centres in each member country, and that will save them significant time, money and other resources. This agreement will help flagship British businesses such as Standard Chartered and BT to gain smoother access to markets in Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia, strengthening our trade with those nations for years to come.

We also have a ratchet mechanism for the first time with Malaysia, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Singapore, Brunei and Vietnam, meaning that if those countries relax rules for a particular service, restrictions cannot then be reintroduced in future. That is another clear example of how this agreement will unlock smoother, simpler trade. The director general of the Institute of Export and International Trade, Marco Forgiione, has rightly said:

"This is all good news for UK businesses, giving them greater access to one of the fastest growing regions in the world".

The issue is not just the benefits that joining this partnership will bring over the short term. This is a growing agreement, designed to expand and bring in more markets and more opportunities for UK businesses in the long run. As the first acceding country, we will be ideally placed to take advantage of that future growth.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome our accession to CPTPP, which I think will be of great national benefit, but understandably Members across the House will look to businesses in their constituency. The Secretary of State is well aware that many businesses in my constituency in the Humber region are focused on the energy sector, particularly renewable energy. Does she see any great advantages for them?

Kemi Badenoch: There are multiple advantages that will accrue to my hon. Friend's constituency. I do not specifically have figures for the energy sector, but I do have good news relating to Yorkshire and the Humber: 465 businesses are already exporting to Malaysia from Yorkshire and the Humber, and CPTPP will help to boost that region's economy by around £210 million in the long run. In 2022, Yorkshire and the Humber exported £1.3 billion-worth of goods to CPTPP. Within five years, tariffs of up to 30% will be eliminated on UK exports of machinery to Malaysia, cutting costs for businesses in Yorkshire and the Humber. We will reduce

tariffs and non-tariff barriers, which could mean many more companies—such as the jukebox manufacturer Sound Leisure, which already exports to five CPTPP countries—being able to enter more dynamic markets.

The Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), raised questions about China, and I promised to address them. On China's application to accede to the agreement, which I know many hon. Members are interested in, let me first say that there are six economies with applications to join the group—China, Taiwan, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Ukraine—and more may apply. Members have not yet made any decisions on which economies will accede in future.

Every applicant must fulfil three essential criteria, called the Auckland principles, to join the group. First, they must be able to meet the high standards of the agreement. Secondly, they must have a track record of compliance with existing trade commitments. Thirdly, and crucially, they must command a consensus of the whole group. These are strong criteria, and they make it clear that working as a bloc is vital. The purpose of this partnership is to be a growing trade bloc, and we share that ambition. We want this agreement to grow, but our accession has set a clear precedent for those that follow. The robust process that the UK has been through has only reinforced the high standards that the partnership seeks to promote, and it has proved that the bar is not easy to meet.

Mr Jayawardena: Does that not prove that by being positive and seeking to engage with partners around the world, we can shape this trade area in line with our geostrategic and trade interests?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, it absolutely does. That is one of the ways that we are able to increase UK influence across the world, not just in Europe or near neighbouring countries. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right on that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about free and fair trade and about high standards, but there is nothing on labour rights in this CPTPP deal. Is that because she does not care about labour rights? Does she not think it matters whether UK businesses and workers have to compete with those producing products and services in circumstances where there are no trade union rights and no health and safety rights, for example? Is it because she does not care about labour rights, or because she was unable to negotiate anything?

Kemi Badenoch: I think the hon. Lady might be confusing the contents of the Bill with the text of the agreement. The text of the agreement is on gov.uk, and she will find a chapter there that covers labour rights.

I turn briefly to the Bill. It is technical in nature, but in enabling us to comply with the provisions of the deal, it is crucial to unlocking the benefits I have described. First, the Bill will ensure that the UK's domestic procurement regime is compliant with the partnership's rules, and it will give effect to the UK's market access commitments to CPTPP suppliers. This small change will deliver big benefits for British businesses, allowing them to compete for contracts in Canada, Japan and

Peru that go beyond our existing agreements. It will also mark the UK's first ever trade agreement with Malaysia and Brunei that contains Government procurement provisions, and will create entirely new access opportunities for UK businesses. The Bill will also allow conformity assessment bodies established in parties' territories to apply for approval in the UK. This will mirror the treatment that UK conformity assessment bodies will receive from CPTPP parties, which would reduce costs for UK businesses.

The Bill will amend domestic law so that, in relation to agrifoods only, an application to register a geographical indicator can be opposed on the ground that it is likely to cause confusion with a pre-existing trademark or application for a trademark. The Bill will also introduce the ability to cancel a registered agrifood GI on the ground that, at the time the GI was applied for, it was likely to cause confusion with a pre-existing trademark or application for a trademark, or because it is a generic term.

Finally, the Bill brings our approach to copyright in line with the CPTPP by amending the basis on which foreign performers, such as musicians, can qualify for rights in the UK.

In sum, the implementation of the Bill is essential for the UK to meet its obligations upon accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. The agreement offers significant benefits to UK businesses and consumers, by lowering tariffs, driving up trade and giving us access to the markets that will be front and centre of the global economy for the next quarter century. It is right that we seize the many opportunities that the partnership will bring, which is why I commend this Bill to the House.

6.30 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): We support accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. We have concerns about the Bill and will be seeking additional safeguards, but we will not seek to divide the House this evening.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, have said, the Bill is overshadowed by the apparent collapse of bilateral FTA negotiations with Canada, one of CPTPP's most important members. There has been no statement to the House, and I read the transcript of the Secretary of State's evidence to the Business and Trade Committee and saw no reference to the collapse of those negotiations. As I understand it, there has not even been a written statement to the House. This is one further sign of the Government's cavalier approach to trade.

Stella Creasy: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, because this really matters. With £750 million-worth of British car exports at stake, the Canadian Trade Minister, Mary Ng, has said on the record that she is "disappointed" the talks have fallen apart. The Ministers shouting "fake news" need to be clear and honest with the British workers whose jobs are at stake. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need some honesty from the Government? If they think the talks have not fallen apart, can they tell us when they will start again?

Gareth Thomas: I welcome my hon. Friend's call for clarity from the Secretary of State, because the collapse of these talks leaves our exporters to Canada worse off than when we were in Europe. There has been no deal with the US, no deal by Diwali with India, no courage to do a veterinary agreement with the EU, and now this failure by Ministers.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I welcome the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for the Canada agreement, but can he explain why, on 8 February 2017, he voted against the UK doing a deal with Canada in the first place?

Gareth Thomas: The right hon. Gentleman has some gall asking that question, bearing in mind that, during parliamentary consideration of the Trade Act 2021, he promised to negotiate a better agreement than the EU had. Now we find ourselves having worse terms of trade with Canada than we had when we were in the EU.

It is striking, too, that one issue that bedevilled those discussions on the EU-Canada deal is now supported by Conservative Members. The Secretary of State specifically sought to avoid investor-state dispute settlement provisions in the bilateral deal with Canada that has now collapsed. We raised those concerns at the time.

This Bill and our accession to CPTPP will not make up for the tens of millions of pounds of extra costs that manufacturers and the car industry will face when exporting to Canada due to the loss of EU cumulation rights and the higher tariffs that will result from April. This Bill will also not be much help for dairy businesses that export to Canada. Cheese exporters are now facing tariffs of 245%, because Ministers were too late to try to stop the loss of a vital quota for tariff rate reductions. Ministers had to be woken up to this issue by questions from the Opposition.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I was a guest on the Business and Trade Committee last week, and I specifically raised the issue of cheese. If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention, he would have heard that our tariff rate quota does not exceed the amount we previously exported. Cheese producers, particularly those in Wensleydale, can therefore sleep well at night.

Gareth Thomas: I do not know what happens in Wensleydale, but I have seen the comments and worries of other cheese exporters. During that Select Committee hearing, the right hon. Gentleman shared the concern of many Opposition Members about ISDS provisions.

The Secretary of State said that negotiations on the loss of EU cumulation rights for our exports of cars and other manufactured goods have not come to an end, but it is difficult to see how her pulling the plug on bilateral discussions with Canada on a new FTA will help to secure those cumulation rights. A trade deal should work for all parts of the country, including farmers, but evidence to the Select Committee made it clear that accession to CPTPP will mean further losses to the agriculture sector and the semi-processed agricultural food sector.

Ministers have been sending signals for some time that they are willing to ignore farmers. The deal with Europe put up huge barriers to trade for British farmers. On the deal with Australia, one of Britain's own negotiating team said that we

"gave away far too much for far too little".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Now, we have further losses through CPTPP.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being extremely selective about the evidence given to the Business and Trade Committee last week. When the Trade and Agriculture Commission—the statutory body that reviews the trade deals we sign—came before us, it said that membership of CPTPP will have no overall impact on UK farming. Would the hon. Gentleman like to correct the record?

Gareth Thomas: As the hon. Gentleman knows, other evidence was given to the Select Committee that underlined the likely loss to farmers and the agriculture sector in general. I will be happy to send him the note from that Select Committee.

There are questions about the intellectual property section of the Bill. There are wider concerns that Britain has been forced to be a rule-taker on the use of secret courts, that there are poor environmental and labour rights provisions and, crucially, that Ministers have no plan to help British business capitalise on this deal. Given the Government's woeful performance on economic growth, the recent huge increases in barriers to trade and the cuts in support for exporters, we are pleased about any measures that help our exporters even a fraction.

The Secretary of State did not own up to it but, for the foreseeable future, this trade deal will have, at best, a minor impact on our terms of trade. There are trade benefits to membership, notably in the rules of origin provisions and in trade with Malaysia and Brunei, and there is longer-term potential if CPTPP becomes a deeper or more extensive trade bloc. In geopolitical terms, the closer ties with allies in the Indo-Pacific that CPTPP ushers in are welcome in these increasingly uncertain times.

Unfortunately, rational debate about these opportunities and trade-offs has been hampered by some of the more extravagant and exaggerated claims made by Conservative Members for the benefits of CPTPP membership. It was set to offer "unparalleled opportunities" for the UK. It was going to be a "glittering post-Brexit prize". The Secretary of State has even done her own bit for such boosterism, with her Department claiming last year that all that is needed is for the US and half the rest of the world to join, and then there would be an extra £21 billion for the UK. I enjoyed "Wonka", but I did not expect to find that level of fantasy preparing for this debate.

According to the Government's own figures, this trade treaty was only ever going to deliver a 0.08% increase in economic growth over 10 years. It is nice to have, particularly given the mess that the Government are making of the economy, but now even the limited trade benefits they promised us have been cut in half.

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman references my Department's trade figures. These are modelling forecasts based on old figures that did not count the dynamic effects of trade agreements. They are completely out of date. They were done well before the agreement had even been negotiated, so they should not be used as a basis for deciding how this agreement will do.

Gareth Thomas: One set of figures the Secretary of State's Department definitely did not put together were those that the Office for Budget Responsibility produced. It now expects only a 0.04% increase in our economic

growth, after a decade, from joining CPTPP. As we already have free trade agreements in place with nine of the other 11 CPTPP members, formally joining CPTPP feels rather thin compensation for Ministers' many other failures on trade.

Liam Byrne: In the light of the news that the figures that have been tabled by the Department are not accurate—I can barely believe it—would my hon. Friend, like me, have expected there to be a new impact assessment alongside the Bill, with the latest departmental assessments set out clearly therein?

Gareth Thomas: It would have been an excellent idea if the Secretary of State had published those. Perhaps she might be willing to publish them at the same time as giving us a statement about what exactly is going on in the negotiations with Canada. We will have to use the review of CPTPP in 2026 to try to increase more markedly the benefits of membership for British jobs, British consumers and growth.

Richard Graham: Interestingly, the shadow Minister is trying to have his cake and eat it. He is saying that the Government have made extravagant claims for the importance of CPTPP, while recognising that it will have a useful, modest role. As for the statistics that the Department might produce, does he agree that it would be difficult for the Department to project accurately what might happen over the next 10 years, because a cluster of nations, at least three of them within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, might well apply to join, but we cannot speculate on that in advance? Surely he would agree that the potential of this opportunity represents a decent-sized prize for the UK.

Gareth Thomas: All I say to the hon. Gentleman is that I have recognised that there are benefits to accession, which is why we are not seeking to divide the House tonight, and that I will come on to the issue of potential new countries joining CPTPP in a bit.

The temptation for Ministers to exaggerate the significance of what this Bill ushers in—

Mr Jayawardena: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Thomas: Why not?

Mr Jayawardena: Given that the hon. Gentleman recognises that there are opportunities from this deal and that, thanks to the success of our continuity agreement programme, we have trade deals with many countries there already, does he not accept that the diagonal cumulation that is part of CPTPP is a huge boost to British businesses, in terms of supply chains?

Gareth Thomas: As I think the right hon. Gentleman may have heard—perhaps he was not listening—I did acknowledge that one of the benefits that will come from CPTPP accession is better rules of origin. However, I gently say to him that we should not exaggerate the benefits of those, because the benefits are not likely to be that huge. They are important to have, of course, given the economic mess he and other former Ministers helped to create, but those benefits are, none the less, modest.

As I said, the temptation for Ministers to exaggerate the significance of what this Bill ushers in is understandable, given that over the past 10 years Britain has had the worst export record of any member of the G7 apart from Japan. That partly explains why the British people have lower living standards now than they did when Labour left office. It is one reason why the British people have become, on average, £10,000 worse off since 2010 and it is key to why the UK is forecast to have the lowest growth in the G7 this year.

Ministers have published no trade strategy and provided no clarity about how the Bill fits in with wider trade ambitions. They have axed support for businesses to get to trade shows and cut funding for business groups to lead trade missions. There is little obvious planning to help businesses use the limited extra opportunities opened up through this Bill and other trade deals. Sensible policies to improve trade with Europe and cut red tape have been vetoed. Sadly, it is therefore not surprising that the independent OBR now expects our trade to grow by just 0.1% this year and in the next two years—that is a shameful record.

Matt Western: When, in a former life, I served on the Select Committee on International Trade, one thing we talked about was giving Parliament greater ability to scrutinise trade deals before they were validated. Does my hon. Friend think that we, in this place, should have more opportunity to scrutinise these deals? As he is describing it, what is being presented today is negligible in its contribution to UK growth, as has been explained.

Gareth Thomas: I share my hon. Friend's opinion. He aired it during consideration of the Trade Bill a couple of years ago and I hope he might be willing to air it in this Bill's Committee.

There is little sign either of a plan to ensure that this Bill helps CPTPP accession boost trade in the nations and regions of the UK. The Resolution Foundation published analysis last week showing that, despite all the promises of levelling up, more than 50% of services exports are concentrated in just one region of the UK. Ministers have never been interested in tackling those huge imbalances. Labour Members all remember the broken promises on trade: the “oven ready” Brexit deal; levelling up through trade; and 80% of the world being covered by new trade agreements. One by one, each of those promises that the Conservative party made to the British people have been broken.

No one outside Conservative circles will be surprised that this Bill is not going to lead to a huge boost to economic growth any time soon. The negotiations to join CPTPP were led by the same people who gave Australian farmers everything they wanted, by the same Ministers who boasted about a trade deal with Japan that will help their exporters four times more than ours and which has been championed by the very same Ministers who negotiated a trade treaty with Europe that has hiked up trade barriers, increased the cost of food and generated huge bureaucracy for business.

On the arrangements for scrutiny of this Bill, one would have hoped that Ministers would have learned lessons from previous trade Bills this House has considered, and that scrutiny arrangements before and after negotiations might have improved. We have, at least, not had the spectacle of Trade Ministers at war for a little while or

[Gareth Thomas]

of their failing to turn up to a Select Committee to answer basic questions about trade agreements. I appreciate that Lord Frost is not quite so popular any longer, but when even he can lament, when debating this very Bill in the other place, that scrutiny of trade agreements was better when we were in the European Union, there is clearly some way to go.

That is all the more the case because Ministers appear to be using this Bill to solve an apparent problem with intellectual property treaty rules, which may or may not be linked to CPTPP—the Minister in the Lords did not seem too clear on that; a mere two weeks ago, and only after pressure in the other place, Ministers rushed out a consultation document on this provision of the Bill, which is contained in clause 5 and potentially gives American and other overseas businesses huge sums that would otherwise have helped emerging British artistic talent. That consultation will not be finished until 11 March, and there is absolutely no clue as to when Ministers might have finished considering the responses and deigned to let us all have their thoughts on the way forward.

During bilateral trade negotiations, the Government were widely accused of giving in to the demands of Australian negotiators far too easily, creating dangerous precedents for those wanting to get access to our agricultural markets through other trade deals. It appears that Ministers are in danger of doing something similar with the copyright provisions in this Bill: giving away, when there appears to be no reason to do so, extra rights to receive payments to foreign performers—for example, those in America, which is cited in the consultation document and is not currently a member of CPTPP. That would reduce the earnings of our artists and our businesses here, which could hold back the development of the next generation of British musicians and artists.

Industry figures argue that there is nothing in CPTPP to justify the need to give foreign rights holders and performers payments where they do not currently receive them. If Ministers think those industry voices are wrong, I look forward to the Minister for Trade Policy spelling out, when he winds up, what specifically in CPTPP requires the change. Nothing in the trade deals with Australia or Japan, despite both of them being CPTPP members, required such a legal change then, so why do we need this now? It looks like Ministers are trying to sneak through changes to rules that are, at best, only loosely related to CPTPP by using this legislation instead of a separate and proper process and debate about why such changes are needed.

In winding up the debate, will the Minister explain to the House why changes to the way in which foreign record labels and recording artists qualify for payment rights—changes which, let us be clear, could cost British artists more than £100 million over the next decade, according to the Government's own figures—are necessary now?

In Committee, we will also want to explore why Ministers have not sought exemptions to the ISDS provisions in the CPTPP as our allies in Australia and New Zealand have done, and as Canada did with the US during the United States-Mexico-Canada agreement negotiations. It is all the more surprising as Ministers were specifically trying to avoid ISDS provisions in the now collapsed UK-Canada FTA negotiations.

There has been a significant increase in legal disputes using ISDS provisions, and a series of cases have had a chilling impact on a range of progressive public policies on environmental issues, labour standards and public services. We are yet to hear a convincing explanation from Ministers as to why ISDS is still needed—a point that the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) referenced in relation to the Select Committee meeting next week.

Sir Robert Goodwill: I may have misheard but did the hon. Gentleman just say that the Australia deal was a bad deal for farmers and that it is increasing the cost of food? Australian wine is now certainly cheaper on our shelves, and our biggest food or drink export is Scotch whisky, which always benefits from free trade deals.

Gareth Thomas: I remember the comments made by the National Farmers Union about the Australia deal, so the right hon. Gentleman may want to look back at those before he rushes to make such an intervention again.

In Committee, we will also explore the further threat to Britain's steel industry from the possibility of cheap imports of iron and steel from Vietnam, which may actually be produced in China. There has been growing debate about China's interest in acceding to the CPTPP and its record on human rights. As my noble Friend Lord Collins pointed out, there are no meaningful, enforceable human rights provisions in the treaty. Nothing in law at the moment requires Ministers to allow debate in the House if there is agreement among CPTPP members to support China's—or any other country's—accession to the CPTPP. Will Ministers set out how they will ensure transparency over their consideration of new country applications once we are members of the CPTPP?

There continue to be a series of concerns about how environmental issues, such as deforestation, climate change and pesticide use are dealt with through the CPTPP. The Government's record does not encourage confidence that those issues were close to the forefront of Ministers' minds during negotiations.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Does he agree that there is a huge amount of public concern about the way that the Government have been managing environmental issues in their trade negotiations—both in the Australia deal and this one?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is right and we hope to pursue those issues in Committee. He would be very welcome to join us in so doing. There are benefits to joining the CPTPP and we support doing so, but there are real concerns as to whether Ministers have got us the best deal possible, which we will revisit in Committee.

6.53 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I would say that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), but he is so pessimistic and full of doom and gloom that he makes me think that he is the Goldilocks of international trade. We are always in the same place when we debate these issues with Labour Members, because we cannot sign trade agreements quick enough for them or perhaps we take too long. In fact, we sign trade agreements when they are good for our businesses, our producers and consumers—that is exactly where we must be.

The hon. Gentleman talks about membership of the CPTPP and says that there are no parameters to stop new members, but in her opening remarks the Secretary of State made the point about the Auckland principles and the fact that there has to be a consensual approach to new membership. The Opposition criticise our record on international trade and the agreements we have signed, discounting the fact that we have: an agreement with Australia and New Zealand; three memorandums of understanding with American states; 75 roll-over deals; discussions under way with the Gulf Co-operation Council, Israel and India; and now accession to the CPTPP, if we pass the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to change our legislative programme to ensure that ratification can take place; that is why we are here and what we are debating.

I am delighted to be a member of the Business and Trade Committee. I welcome that the CPTPP is our accession to the fastest growing region in the world, and that it will give huge geopolitical value to the UK and what we do with our friends and allies around the world. If anyone wants something to send them to sleep, they can read my report, “Looking East”, for the Centre for Policy Studies. We are joining the leading comprehensive free trade agreement, with every forecast pointing to the value that this body will play not just in the next 10 years, but in the next five; we have to recognise those benefits.

As has been said, in nearly every case, forecasts undervalue free trade agreements, not least because of the modelling but also because, as free trade agreements are signed and accessions completed, businesses start to take advantage of the agreements and grow as a result.

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Does he agree that when a previous Committee—of which we were both members—looked at free trade deals, it found that the very fact of doing a trade deal creates an interest that is not otherwise there? It means that everybody talks about the trade opportunity that presents itself.

Anthony Mangnall: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. That is exactly the reason that we have trade envoys—in his case, he goes to Thailand to enhance the relationship between Thai and UK businesses. It is also for that exact reason that the first line of the gov.uk webpage on CPTPP says: “We will help businesses take advantage of CPTPP. Please keep logging on so you can see how we can help you to take advantage.” Far from stepping back and not helping businesses, we are on the front foot in ensuring that we can support them.

I want to make a couple of points about what I have learned, first on the International Trade Committee and now on the Business and Trade Committee. It is always important for the House to have a say, and to have a debate on the full terms of our free trade agreements. Under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, we have 21 sitting days to be able to debate the CPTPP. The Secretary of State appeared before the Business and Trade Committee last week. I hope that we can have a debate, because it is important for all Members of the House to be able to look at the many benefits that the CPTPP will bring them, and their constituents, producers and consumers, and for those benefits to be highlighted on the Floor of the House.

CRAg also provides for a voteable motion, which has not been used since its introduction; and it would be useful to have vocal support for our trade agreements, not least to show our friends and allies, with whom we do these deals, that we are behind them.

Within the Bill, I note the changes to the procurement legislative framework. I commend the fact that it is already building on the excellent work in the Procurement Act 2023, which specifically helps small businesses to take advantage of the agreements we have signed; again, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow West, could have made reference to that legislation or to the Electronic Trade Documents Act 2023—the list goes on and I could go on to, if he would like me to. Of course, there is also the value placed on intellectual property—setting a minimum standard of protections across patents, geographical indicators, copyrights, trade secrets, trademarks and designs, including enforcement mechanisms. Above all, there is a focus not only on how to remove tariffs, but on how to remove non-tariff and technical barriers to trade. The creation of conformity assessment procedures also ensures that we can help businesses from every walk of life to take advantage of the CPTPP—this fastest growing region.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend has made a number of absolutely correct statements about the benefits of the agreement. To bring it alive in the specific context of our first ever trade and investment agreement, with Malaysia: because we will be working closely with their ministries, we will see opportunities for joint marketing in ways that we have not often seen around the world. It is worth remembering that our investments over there, which are considerable, generate dividends back to this country. That is as important as attracting inward investment here, which, of course, give them dividends back there. Does my hon. Friend agree that the opportunities in the Bill are there for everyone to recognise; that it is helpful that the Labour party finally agrees that free trade agreements, and this particular agreement, are a positive step forward for the country; and that we should all recognise the opportunities that come after the agreement, and mobilise our chambers of commerce and our small and medium-sized enterprises to take advantage of them?

Anthony Mangnall: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to get my breath back and for the points that he made. I hope SNP Members are listening, because they could make it a hat-trick and support their first international free trade agreement while they are at it. Of course, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must recognise both the export value and the import impact. We must also recognise, as was shown clearly through the pandemic, that businesses that have international markets are more resilient to shocks and can take further advantages of the deals that we are putting in front of them. The more that we can get trade deals in front of small businesses, encouraging them to seek out new markets, the more we can safeguard them for a long-term future.

Mark Pawsey: I have heard my hon. Friend talk about goods, but I want to hear more about services. We see this purely through the prism of goods going backwards and forwards, but our great strength is services. Where are the service opportunities in this deal?

Anthony Mangnall: As ever, my colleague on the Business and Trade Committee has steered me back on to the right path. Of course there is enormous value within the legal and financial sectors—the service economy—in which 80% of our economy is based. We must make sure that we are taking full advantage of the deal. We need to get those businesses out there, to look at where we can change international regulation, and to see that there is more mutual co-operation. My hon. Friend is right and has been a strong advocate of those points over the past few months on the Select Committee.

Richard Graham: On service exports, my hon. Friend will know, as do many colleagues on the Conservative Benches, that education is one of our major service exports. We have five universities operating in Malaysia. We have a number of schools operating around south-east Asia and in all the other nations involved in the trans-Pacific partnership. All those will benefit from this agreement. Does he see that, as perhaps other nations in ASEAN pick up the opportunity of TPP, there will be further education opportunities?

Anthony Mangnall: Education is one of the jewels in our crown of export opportunities. When we look at what has been created by UK schools in the far east, along with universities that are now exploring those routes, we see that there is an enormous amount of ground to cover and opportunity for those businesses to take advantage of. We are looking to access a region that is worth about £12 trillion, and which is closing in on well over 50% of world trade. This vibrant economic region offers us not just the opportunity, but the ability to create new industries and to be at the forefront of advanced manufacturing—of pharmaceuticals, genomics, quantum and photonics. Whatever we might think, we can take advantage of these deals. Furthermore, the removal of tariffs and technical boundaries will only benefit those services, businesses and advanced manufacturing areas.

Dr Hudson: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the benefits of this accession agreement. We have talked about goods, services, education, and science and technology, which are all part of Britain's global soft power. We will be able to export some of our technology, education and values, not least in food production and farming and in how we regard animal health. A major benefit of our joining this partnership is to spread the good work that the UK does.

Anthony Mangnall: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has made that point and I thank him for all the work that he does on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. He is right to raise the fact that we have such high standards, and that by joining organisations such as this, we will not only serve as an example to others, but show how it is possible to create productive and profitable markets.

Stella Creasy: I thank the hon. Member for giving way and appreciate that he feels very strongly about this issue. Will he clarify this for those listening—that the animal welfare standards that we abided by as part of the European Union are not those we are going to see in Canada, Australia or New Zealand? Indeed, we are allowing those goods to be imported tariff-free as part of deals such as this, but we are about to put a whacking great tariff on consignments and import safety checks

on food coming in from Europe. Does he recognise that we are sending different messages about the value of animal standards?

Anthony Mangnall: I refer the hon. Lady to my previous remarks on the TAC report on CPTPP. She has made a point about Australia, and it is fair to give an answer on that. None the less, the point is that we are still safeguarding ourselves against hormone-injected beef and chlorinated chicken. Yes, there are variable standards around the world; we have to recognise that not all trade deals are Christmas trees on which to hang baubles and everything else. We can lead by example. Our standards are the highest in the world, and there is nothing to say that they are not a key persuader for other countries to follow suit in showing how there can be successful markets on that front.

Mark Garnier *rose*—

Anthony Mangnall: I will give way, probably for the last time.

Mark Garnier: I would like to follow on from the point about beef and meat from Australia. We imported it for years and years when we were part of the European Union. This is not brand new; we have been doing it for a long, long time.

Anthony Mangnall: That is exactly why we put things such as the Trade and Agriculture Commission on to a statutory footing, so that it could report on these trade agreements. Its opinion is fully weighted with the Government response and comes in during the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process and allows us in this House to consider it. If the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) wants to debate this point in a general debate on CPTPP, I would look forward to doing it all over again. Of course, the whole purpose of the process is to give us the chance to take full consideration of the agricultural community's view.

I have gone on for far too long, Mr Deputy Speaker—
[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you very much!
[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] I believe that that is the first time that anyone in the House has ever told me to carry on, but I am very grateful for it none the less.

We have huge opportunities in the UK to strike new trade agreements to encourage our economy to boom. It is striking that, in his opening remarks, the shadow Minister on the Labour Front Bench did not recognise that, since 2010, the UK's economy has outperformed that of Portugal, Italy, Spain, Germany and France, to name but a few. This trade agreement signals not just an intent to sign more trade deals in the future, but an approach that we can take if we work together with businesses, financial services, legal services and all industry across this country to bring value to London and to all regions of the United Kingdom. I look forward to seeing its ratification and to this Bill being passed unamended.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): In saying that you had gone on for far too long, you managed to unite both sides of the House, Mr Mangnall, so congratulations.

7.6 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): First, let me say that we on the SNP Benches are also not looking to divide the House. I thought that I might get the opportunity to pre-empt the jibe that is often made about how my party is against trade deals, but the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) got there first. I saw that those on the Labour Front Bench also took a sideswipe with their rather nonsensical jibe. I freely admit that we have yet to find a deal signed by this Government that we are happy to support. Fundamentally—I say this again—we are in favour of good trade deals and we are not in favour of poor trade deals. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Totnes is very, very excitable. For the purposes of *Hansard*, he is asking me to name one, but the sad fact is that I cannot name one that has been signed by this Government. Trying to help those on the Treasury Bench and Back Benchers understand the difference feels a bit like Father Ted trying to explain to Father Dougal the difference between cows that are small and cows that are far away.

In common with the shadow Minister, we are not saying that there cannot be some advantages of the CPTPP deal, but what we could not be clearer about is that, taken in their totality, all the trade deals signed to date—or even those that could have been signed had negotiations not failed to get off the starting block, or those that have hit the buffers in recent days—are a very poor substitute for the trade deals that we have left behind. In the manner in which it chose to leave the European Union, the UK managed not only to create trade borders with 27 other countries, but, unfathomably, to create one with itself, when it created a trade border down the middle of the Irish sea between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In the CPTPP, we have essentially swapped the four freedoms in Europe of goods, capital, services and people, in a market of half a billion people with a GDP of over £15 trillion, which was right on our doorstep and which already took over 40% of our exports, with a much lesser deal, with a combined economy of almost half the size, on the opposite side of the world, which currently takes only 8% of our exports. A great deal of growth would need to happen in that market—somewhat implausibly I have to say—even to come close to matching what has been left behind.

The economic benefits of joining the CPTPP are pretty small. I know the Government do not like these figures being repeated—which seems as good a reason as any to go on and repeat them—but the UK Government's own impact assessment indicated the long-run increase in GDP would be £2 billion, or 0.06% of GDP. The OBR even had it as 0.04% in the long run. As John Maynard Keynes said:

“In the long run we are all dead.”

In a written answer to me dated 11 September last year, the then Minister of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), said that the impact assessment, where the £2 billion figure had come from, had

“been independently scrutinised by the Regulatory Policy Committee”.

I went and had a look at what the Regulatory Policy Committee had to say in order to get an idea of what “the long run” might actually mean. The Committee's document said:

“When compared to projected levels of GDP or trade in 2040 without the agreement, the FTA's main impacts (based on central estimates and in 2021 prices) are that...UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to increase by £2.0 billion.”

What the Minister said in his reply will therefore be correct, just not for a further 16 years or so. In the meantime, we have a real, immediate drop of 4% in GDP resulting from Brexit, leaving our economy permanently driving with the handbrake on.

I understand that the Government intend to adhere to the Sewel convention on this occasion and will seek the legislative consent of the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies for the Bill. The Government should do that for every piece of legislation that comes through this place, not just performatively whenever they are confident of getting a positive response. While the benefits of free trade are obvious, there is also an obvious benefit to having tariffs in place. Tariffs serve a purpose; they are not just about protectionism, as some would have it.

I was encouraged to hear the Secretary of State say that we would never compromise on animal welfare standards, but one sector where that is in real danger of happening is the egg production sector. I see the Minister for Trade Policy wrinkling his brow. He and I have had an exchange on this before. The sector is worth over £1 billion to the UK economy. Tariffs exist currently to protect the industry from imports from mass-producing jurisdictions such as India and Mexico, which have lower standards than we insist on for our domestic producers, and that our consumers rightly demand.

The Minister responded, again not inaccurately, that the UK does not import many eggs. Well, eggs are quite fragile. It is difficult enough sometimes to transport them from the shops back to our kitchens intact, let alone right around the world—but of course the egg products that we are talking about are liquefied or even powdered egg products, which once put into a shipping container can be transported around the world at comparatively very low cost. It would not require a huge amount of displacement in the market to get a foothold if those products were allowed in under the terms of the CPTPP. Let us be under no illusions: for all that it is a £1 billion domestic industry, once egg producers are gone, they are gone and they are not coming back, so there is a real risk of harm and of our standards being undermined whatever level we choose to set them at domestically, because the tariff that was there to maintain a block on imports that did not meet those standards will effectively have been taken away.

Stella Creasy: I am not sure that the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) quite understands what is about to happen with the border target operating model that fits alongside the legislation. A health check certificate and a consignment charge will be required for eggs and egg products imported from Europe, with no equivalent health check or standard required for eggs imported from CPTPP countries, thus creating an imbalance and making the scenario that the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) is talking about more likely, because of the way in which eggs are produced in this country in collaboration with Europe.

Richard Thomson: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. One of the ironies here is that because our borders will no longer be protected by food import checks at Rotterdam, there has basically been a free-for-all in terms of the standard of products that can come in. I welcome the fact that there will be checks in order to protect our biosphere, but that comes at a financial cost that will hit consumers hard at a time when food inflation remains high and we are in the middle of a cost of living crisis. That is just one example of the red tape that we were told would be cut by Brexit not being cut sideways; it has been cut lengthways, creating far more of the stuff.

Richard Graham: Moving away from eggs, which I do not think will be the major export from Malaysia or other far-eastern members of the trans-Pacific partnership, let us look at the opportunities for Scotland. In the last year or so there have been bumper sales of Scottish whisky. Whisky sales in Singapore are up by some £90 million, and in Malaysia they are up over £30 million. The opportunities arising from being able to export tariff-free to Malaysia will mean a substantial increase in our single most important food and beverage export. Does the hon. Member agree that we should not underestimate the opportunities for Scotland in all this?

Richard Thomson: My point about eggs—I will stay on this subject for a bit—related to India and Mexico, which are major producers. Of course Scottish MPs are interested in good trade outcomes for Scotland, but we look to trade more than just whisky. While any increase in our share of the international spirits market is welcome, it would have done us much more good if the Government with control over domestic duties had not whacked an 11.1% increase in duty on that product last year. I say as gently as I can to the hon. Member that it is not just tariffs that are significant; many jurisdictions take their cue for the taxes levied on a product from the duty set in this country. I contend that we set a very bad example—I hope that he might agree—when whisky is taxed so highly in comparison with other alcohol products in the UK domestic market. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I did not quite catch that. I invite the hon. Member to intervene on me, if he wishes to make a point.

Richard Graham: I was just making the point that taxation raised here is spent on important issues in the United Kingdom. That of course includes, under the Barnett formula, significant subsidies by the English of Scotland.

Richard Thomson: What a load of absolute codswallop. It may have escaped the hon. Member's notice that every part of the UK is in deficit. I do not think that a single part of the UK, perhaps not even London or the south-east, raises more in taxation than it receives in public expenditure, so can he please park the patronising trope about England subsidising everywhere else? Scotland creates one of the highest levels of gross value added of any part of the UK outside the vortex of London and the south-east, which suck in every aspect of capital and talent.

Mark Garnier: In the spirit of trying to bring the debate back to the fantastic opportunities for Scotland, as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Brunei, I was delighted to go to Aberdeen to meet a number of

Scottish companies in the incredibly important business of decommissioning and renewal in the oil and gas industry. Brunei has signed a deal worth, I think, £350 million with Scottish business. That is not subject to any controversy.

May I also say that the hon. Member's contribution to this place is incredibly useful? It is a very good symbol of why members of the SNP and Scottish Members of Parliament are so valuable to the Union, and to debates such as this in the British Parliament. Long may you be welcome here in Britain.

Richard Thomson: We seemed to be being pulled back to the topic, but now I am being tempted to go off down another rabbit hole. While I thank the hon. Member for his generous comments, I know exactly what side my bread is buttered on. I am a long-standing supporter of Scottish independence because I have a simple belief that the best people to run Scotland and make decisions about Scotland are those who have chosen to make their life there. With all due respect to this place and its traditions, I think that we could do a far better job from the Parliament in Edinburgh.

I will get back to the purpose of the debate, as entertaining as that no doubt was for all concerned. The SNP retains concerns about the ability to apply investor-state dispute settlements under the CPTPP. A deal for Canada has, for now at least, hit the buffers, but it was concerning that there was no indication from the Government of any side letters about investor-state dispute settlements similar to those applied in respect of the FTAs with Australia and New Zealand. There is real concern that investor-state dispute settlements could have an impact on standards and decisions taken here.

We firmly believe that trade deals done right can channel and create potential to support decent jobs and raise standards, not just domestically but globally. It is therefore worrying that the ethos of the CPTPP means effectively abandoning the precautionary principle, which places the burden of proof on the producer to show that a product is safe. Instead, the burden will be on the regulator to prove that something is a danger before action can be taken. That can only act as a downward pressure on standards. The committee on regulatory coherence will no doubt also become a focus for this issue, whether we are talking about antibiotics in agriculture, the impact of decisions on deforestation, or something as iconic as palm oil; we have already agreed a 12% tariff on imports from Malaysia, irrespective of the impact that that would have.

We have further concerns about the impact on workers' rights and domestic conditions. There is the risk of being undermined by lower costs elsewhere, resulting from lower standards on labour rights and obligations, or lower regulatory standards more broadly. We are concerned about the impact that that could have on our public services, and our ability to set domestic laws and regulations could come under challenge, either from the economic forces that are unleashed or through the ISDS mechanism.

All things considered, the Government have made a blustery and boosterish contribution, while being very blasé about and dismissive of the concerns raised. As I said earlier, the SNP will not seek to divide the House on the Bill this evening, but we certainly look forward to exploring all those issues further in Committee.

7.21 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I suppose I should start by declaring an interest, because nearly 10 years ago I wrote a book called “Turning to Face the East: How Britain can prosper in the Asian century”, which was an encouragement for exactly this kind of initiative. I am a supporter of CPTPP and I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who is no longer in her place, for joining us at the Business and Trade Committee last week, along with others, to provide evidence on the treaty. The Committee hopes, if its members are amenable, to publish a report on CPTPP over the next couple of weeks, and certainly before Committee stage of this Bill, to try to maximise opportunities to build cross-party consensus on something very important to all our futures.

I want briefly to say a word about size, a word about standards, and a word about settlement of investor disputes, but it behoves us all in this House to recognise the point we start from: trade and export growth is not where it needs to be, or where Members on both sides of the House want it to be. We know the old joke: not all fairytales start with “Once upon a time”; some of them begin with “When I am elected”. Looking back at the Conservative manifesto for the last election, we might be tempted to label it a bit of a fairy story, because it said very clearly that the goal was to set out free trade agreements covering about 80% of British trade, and we are nowhere near that. We are in fact much closer to 60%.

The Secretary of State put most of the onus for that on a change of Administration in America, but the truth is that apart from the cut-and-paste, roll-over trade deals that we have had since leaving the European Union, we have only signed three new free trade deals. I am glad to hear that what would have been the fourth new one, which we hoped to sign with Canada, is not dead, but it certainly appeared to be running into trouble last week. I am sad that the Secretary of State did not come to the House to make a statement about that news today. That would have been appropriate. However, I am grateful that she has made some reassuring noises about it in this debate.

When the Select Committee put the point about the lack of FTAs to the Secretary of State last week, she said that she had “pivoted away” from FTAs. That is not necessarily a good thing, because she went on to say that she, like many economists, thought that FTAs do promote trade. The bottom line is that our export performance is way off target. The Government have set an export target of about £1 trillion by 2030, which interestingly has not been adjusted up for inflation as arguably it should have been, but the Institute of Directors last year said that we need export growth to be getting on for about 3.5%. As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), said, we are nowhere near achieving that performance. We have an export growth forecast of roughly 0.1%, 0.2%, or 0.3%.

The Secretary of State very kindly agreed not to have a public argument with the Office for Budget Responsibility last week, and I think we were all grateful for that, but she said there were different models—not alternative facts, but alternative models—in her Department. I have written to her today to ask for the publication of those models so that the Select Committee can scrutinise them before the Bill goes into Committee. Scale is important because our trade performance is off track.

Generally speaking, economies that trade more, grow faster, and we want our economy to grow faster, because we all share an interest in raising the living standards of our constituents. That is why my the first point, about the scale of CPTPP in the future, is so important.

The Secretary of State has stacked up a lot of her argument on our needing to go in future to where the growth is. She said that if we cannot do trade deals where the growth is today—for example, with our partners in America—we should go to where the growth will be tomorrow. That is a reasonable argument, and Asia-Pacific countries accounted for over 70% of global GDP growth in the decade up to 2023. However, China accounted for about one third of global GDP growth. That is why I pushed the Secretary of State again, as I did last week, to at least show us how we will have a conversation about how this country will make a rational decision with partners on whether to agree to ratify China, if it met the technical standards. We have similar questions to resolve on Taiwan, but in his public pronouncements, President Xi has made it very clear that he is ambitious for China to meet the technical standards. The question is therefore whether, if China met the technical standards, we would stand in the way of ratification, or whether other important geopolitical considerations would inspire us to block it.

Looking beyond China to the CPTPP’s future more generally, given that we have set such store by this treaty, what is our vision for its future? Where is the road map? The Department published a document a year or two ago on the strategic benefits, but the Secretary of State resiled from all the numbers in that report last week. I do not think that is a good way to make public policy, but let me put it this way: our debate about trade policy and strategy ahead of the election would be much stronger if we had good figures on the table about the options and choices confronting our country. We will certainly do our bit in the Business and Trade Committee to supply those figures, but it would be fantastic if the Secretary of State could commit to doing something similar.

The question that follows on from size is about standards. There were controversial topics that we took evidence on last week, and we will capture what we learned in the report that we publish. There were questions about environmental and climate impacts; there are general provisions about those in the treaty, but they are not enforceable and there is not much mention of net zero. If we think about the treaty as something that is fairly marginal for trade today—it represents about a 0.09% GDP uplift over nine years—but is geopolitically important, we need to think about how it becomes a load-bearing structure for more of our ambitions in the world, such as the race to net zero. Maybe when the Minister is winding up he could say a bit more about how we can freight this treaty with some of our other national interests.

The point about food production standards has already come up. No changes to UK standards are entailed in the treaty, but there were concerns about sanitary and phytosanitary rules, based on the precautionary principle. The evidence we heard said that they could be challenged. It is a legally murky area and, on balance, the challenges seem unlikely to succeed, but that is none the less something to explore in the Bill Committee. It could well be that that Committee wants to ensure that further safeguards are written into the Bill over the course of its passage.

[Liam Byrne]

There will be an increase in imports of agrifood goods produced to lower standards than UK standards. That is true when it comes to pesticides, genetically modified organisms and animal welfare, but not to antimicrobials. On pesticides, the Trade and Agriculture Commission found some basis for weaker standards; on GMOs it found some basis for concern. On environmental laws and policies, palm oil imports are obviously controversial, particularly when it comes to deforestation in Malaysia, but the TAC found that the concerns were, if not non-present—there are concerns to be had—then perhaps slightly overstated.

The final point is about investor-state dispute settlements. Again, the treaty extends the application of ISDS to Canada, Japan and Brunei. One way in which that has become such a big issue is that organisations such as the Canadian teachers' pension funds are some of the biggest investors in the world, with significant investments in the UK water industry. There have been 1,300 or 1,500 of those cases around the world. The evidence we heard suggested that the UK was likely to be able to successfully defend such cases. One consideration about which we should hear a little more is whether the presence of those clauses in the Bill creates a chilling effect on the way in which we regulate our markets here. If we wanted to regulate the water industry differently in future, would we not bring forward those regulations because of fear about what would happen and how we might be challenged?

The gains from the treaty, as drafted, are modest. They generally come from the fact that we have a new FTA, as part of the treaty, with Malaysia and Brunei. That is good for whisky, for cars and for chocolate, such as that made in Bournville. A single set of rules of origin and a single cumulation zone are good things. Access to some of the agrifood quotas, such as Canadian dairy, is a good thing. Some of the progress made in the digital chapter, about which the Secretary of State did not talk much, could be quite useful and can be built on more generally.

We have to conclude that the trade benefits as of now are no substitute for ironing out the difficulties that bedevil trade between the UK and our close neighbour, the EU. Across the House, we should collectively ensure that we are doing what we can to advance the prospect of a UK-US trade deal. These are modest trade benefits but an important geostrategic step forward.

It is good to have this Second Reading debate, which I welcome. Like the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), I very much hope that the Government will make time for us to have a debate under the CRaG principles about whether the treaty as a whole goes forward. We would welcome the opportunity to have an amendable motion on that, as the other place did recently on the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has published an excellent report today about how we can better consider treaties. In this new world, Parliament as a whole must get a lot better at studying these kinds of trade agreements and ensuring that they dovetail with other aspects of our economic and national security. I look forward to the debate in the Bill Committee, which I hope will benefit from the report that our Select Committee will supply.

7.33 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): I rise to broadly welcome the UK's accession to the CPTPP. The Liberal Democrats support efforts that create opportunities for British firms around the world, not just in the here and now, but in years to come. However, the reality is that the immediate benefits of the CPTPP will be a drop in the ocean. Given that the UK has, or is about to have, trade agreements with all but two countries that are currently part of the CPTPP, it is perhaps not surprising that analysis suggests that the immediate benefits will be limited and that the Government's own projections show that the economic impact will be minimal.

I will address three particular areas. The first relates to the fears of our farming community, which have been mentioned. The National Farmers Union is concerned about the lack of core standards for food imports. As colleagues in the other place have noted, when it comes to the CPTPP, those concerns are not so much about the protection of UK standards but about the standards in other countries, which could undermine and undercut UK businesses through imports. In particular, UK farmers producing eggs, pork and beef are potentially vulnerable to imports produced using practices that are banned in the UK. I can therefore understand the concern of the farming community, which is proud of the UK's high animal welfare standards in food production and worries about being undercut by lower-standard imports from elsewhere. I also understand why consumers will be worried about food produced to lower standards reaching their local supermarket. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are keen to avoid a race to the bottom, and to ensure that our animal welfare standards are not diminished as part of any trade agreement.

The second issue relates to our creative industries, which are worried about proposed changes to copyright law. The UK has one of the best intellectual property regimes in the world. It is therefore understandable that the businesses and creators that depend on strong IP rights, and that play a vital role in our economy, want assurances from the Government that the UK's accession to the CPTPP will not have an adverse impact on them. Like others, the Alliance for Intellectual Property has raised a number of concerns, noting the lack of reciprocity in the Bill in relation to copyright law, particularly on performers' rights. If I have understood correctly, the Bill would extend payment rights, or equitable remuneration, to foreign artists who perform in the UK, without ensuring reciprocal arrangements for UK artists who perform in those countries. That seems perverse. It would be good to know what impact assessment, if any, has been done on that area. I would welcome clarification from the Minister in his closing remarks.

The third area relates to the accession of other countries. The benefits of the CPTPP may in fact come as other countries with which we do not currently enjoy trade agreements join. However, it would be remiss of me not to mention concerns, which we have already heard, about the potential accession of China. My noble Friend Lord Purvis outlined in the other place the reason a debate about China is so important. He said that it is

“not just the scale of the UK's trade with China but how resilient we are in relation to it.”

Our trade in goods with China is currently at a £40 billion deficit. That is the largest deficit with a single country in our nation's history. As Lord Purvis pointed out:

"The shipping of goods from China, which we depend on for our consumers, comes through the very area where we have deployed military assets"—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 January 2024; Vol. 835, c. 337-38.]

in recent weeks. It is in our geopolitical and strategic trading interests that Parliament devotes time to debating our relationship with China. I hope that the Government will make the most of the UK's place in the CPTPP to protect the interests of our allies in the region, and human rights, from China's actions.

I will finish by reiterating a plea that I have made previously, and which other hon. Members have made in the debate, about the need for greater parliamentary scrutiny of all free trade agreements. We are debating the Bill because primary legislation is required for the UK to be compliant with the CPTPP when it enters into force. In the past, the Government have committed to giving Parliament greater scrutiny of free trade agreements but then reneged on it. They broke their commitment to giving Parliament a vote on the Australia trade deal, for example, which had terrible consequences for British farmers. The fact that we are having this debate today is welcome, but I leave Ministers with the message that it should not be the exception to the rule.

7.38 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will raise three issues: the scrutiny process, ISDS and my ongoing concerns about the impact of the measures.

I am a member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I am the sole Committee member present in the Chamber because the others are on a delegation to Berlin at the moment—I am sure that they are working hard at this time of night, and not having a dinner. As has been mentioned, we published our report today; it is a comprehensive report, agreed by all parties. We have been looking at the overall parliamentary scrutiny process for treaties and free trade agreements and, to be frank, we have unanimously found that the current process is unfit for purpose.

At the moment, Parliament—I do not disparage the Government for this; it has happened consistently in the past—is treated as an afterthought in trade policy. We have not been able to find any meaningful mechanism by which Parliament can influence the negotiating objectives at the beginning of the overall process or oversee negotiations as they proceed, and we are never guaranteed a vote on the final agreement at the end of the process—a point that has been made on a number of occasions by Members across the House.

That contrasts with what happens in other legislatures, particularly the US Congress, where legislators play an incredibly proactive role. I do not think the Government should see the parliamentary process as an imposition with regard to future treaties, but as a method of improving the trade negotiations by allowing Members of Parliament to have an early and ongoing voice in those discussions. It is interesting that other Members—including the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice)—made exactly the same point during a debate in this House on the Australia free trade agreement, way back in November 2022.

The right hon. Gentleman set out how during talks with Japan, the Japanese negotiators used parliamentary motions that their Government could not breach to protect their country's interests.

People will see from the report that we have put forward a fairly comprehensive process by which the House can efficiently and effectively engage itself in such negotiations, with a sifting committee and a scrutiny committee. The House would always have the right to a vote at the end of the day, but more importantly, it would have an influence at the beginning of the negotiations when the overall objectives are set. The proposed process is part of an overall attempt to create greater transparency and, indeed, greater interest within the House in trade negotiations. I hope that the Government will take the Select Committee report away and come back with a positive response, because it contains some very constructive recommendations.

I now turn to the much discussed investor-state dispute settlement procedure. In debates in recent years, Members from across the House have expressed concern about the investor-state dispute mechanism, and those concerns have moved into the mainstream—not just in this country, but in other countries that are moving away from that system. As we have heard, Australia and New Zealand have committed to exclude the ISDS procedure from future trade agreements on the basis that in many instances, that procedure is not in the public interest. I cite the energy charter treaty. That has been the biggest vehicle for ISDS claims, and it is collapsing, with France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and others withdrawing. President Biden has now come out and criticised the ISDS procedures, and has basically excluded them from any future US trade agreements.

As the Minister knows, I have raised this matter in the House a number of times. I am sometimes perplexed: we are told that the Government are committed to the ISDS process, but on the other hand, they have acceded to both Australia and New Zealand exempting themselves from that process with regard to the UK. The last time I raised this issue, the Minister responded by saying—exactly as the Chair of the Business and Trade Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), noted—that the UK has never been successfully challenged under ISDS. That is true, but there is an element of hubris in that position.

Liam Byrne: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and he is absolutely right to flag this issue. The UK Government have not hitherto been successfully challenged under ISDS, but for the first time, countries with very significant foreign direct investment into the UK are involved in this treaty. The figure for Canada alone is \$56 billion. When it came to Japan—the other big investor—ISDS was excluded from the UK-Japan bilateral investment treaty. We need an awful lot more reassurance from the Government on this point, given the scale of investment from countries such as Canada in our country in general, but in sectors such as the water industry in particular.

John McDonnell: I do not know how excellent my speech is—I will just ramble on as usual, I think.

The argument that was put to me by the Minister responding today, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), was that if we cannot trust

[John McDonnell]

Canada in these deals, who can we trust? That is precisely the point, though: Canada will now have a parallel system, and Canadian firms will be able to take legal action in their own country. As a result of that statement by the Minister, I went away and had a look at the figures for Canadian firms under this process, and those firms stand out as being particularly litigious. They have brought over 65 ISDS cases in recent years. I therefore think that there is a chilling effect, exactly as the Chair of the Select Committee said, which at the end of the day can have implications for the UK's right to regulate. If a number of cases are waged against the UK, that may undermine our ability to act more freely when it comes to regulation of the water sector, and also policy development, particularly on issues around water and future public ownership.

Again, I have previously raised this matter with the Secretary of State. What I cannot completely understand is that at the same time that the UK Government are defending the ISDS process with regard to the CPTPP, in the negotiating process for the bilateral free trade agreement they set out a specific objective to exclude the provisions of the ISDS system. That is a contradiction, and the Government's thinking on that matter has not yet been explained to me. As the Minister will also know, there is a remarkably broad range of concern about the ISDS: in October 2023, a letter was submitted to the Government—supported by 30 non-governmental organisations and trade unions and over 50 academics and legal professionals from both the UK and Canada—calling for the immediate negotiation of a side letter between the UK and Canada to disapply the ISDS provisions between the two countries. That is exactly what happened with regard to New Zealand and Australia, and for the life of me, I cannot understand why the Government have not gone down that path for this particular negotiation.

I also want to express some concerns that have been raised about environmental issues and about labour standards. The CPTPP includes a number of countries where abuses of labour rights are widespread. To give a few examples, independent trade unions are banned in Brunei and Vietnam, while forced labour has been widely documented in Malaysia in various pieces of research, and a number of CPTPP member states have not ratified some of the core International Labour Organisation conventions.

The protections for labour rights within the CPTPP are particularly weak: a member state can only challenge another member state over a failure to uphold labour rights if it can be demonstrated that such a failure affected trade, which is notoriously difficult to prove in such cases. The ineffectual nature of that chapter is demonstrated by the fact that since the agreement's conclusion in 2018, no Government have challenged another for abusing rights. The TUC has described the risk of CPTPP making it

“easier for unethical companies and investors to do business with countries where it's easier to exploit workers”—

a risk that it considers to be significant. I do not think we have addressed that issue sufficiently.

There are also concerns regarding standards in partner countries. For example, as has already been said, pesticide standards could be undermined. Some 119 pesticides

that are banned in the UK are allowed for use in one or more CPTPP member states. Although accession to the CPTPP does not necessitate any lowering of UK standards in this regard, when the peers debated this issue, there were really practical questions about the sufficiency of the UK's border testing regime in keeping banned substances out. Again, it is an issue that needs further consideration in more detail as we go through the whole process.

The issue has been raised—and I know that the Chair of the Select Committee said that this may well have been exaggerated or overestimated in some of the debates—that the UK has acceded to Malaysia's demand to lower tariffs on palm oil to zero. I have to say that the evidence I have seen and the representations I have received from the Trade Justice Movement and others is that this is highly likely to increase palm oil exports and, with that, the risk of deforestation, which will serve to undermine indigenous and local community land rights and threaten natural habitats for species such as orangutans. We have seen the various research and the range of evidence mounting on this particular issue. Again, it was debated in the Lords in the context of the potential protections afforded by the UK forest risk commodities legislation, under section 17 of the Environment Act 2021, but it is unclear when these regulations will actually come into effect, and therefore many believe that the protections are not in place at this stage.

There is also a view that accession to the CPTPP will bring risks of the erosion of preferences, under which current preferential trade agreements afforded to exporters in one country will bring negative development impacts on others. One example cited by the Trade Justice Movement is that Afruibana, the association representing banana exporters across Africa, has set out concerns regarding the potential impacts of tariff liberalisation in South and central America for those they represent.

Finally, one of the reports sent to me was a health impact assessment produced by Public Health Wales. It identified a range of diverse potential impacts, including the worsening of global air pollution due to transport distances for goods, the loss of employment for some population groups and, of course, the risk of ISDS cases being brought against regulations that seek to support public health outcomes. It is an important impact assessment that needs further scrutiny and examination. It leaves me with the impression overall that there has been a lack of impact assessments, so I look forward to the Select Committee report, which will go into further depths on this.

I come to the conclusion that, with all the risks involved and with such doubt surrounding the CPTPP, it will achieve what we could not even describe as a marginal economic gain over the length of time it will be in place, and I fear to tread on treaties and agreements of this sort. I just think that, although there is not going to be a vote tonight, I might be tempted at a later date to vote against the Bill—so I had better let the Labour Whips know that.

7.53 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The CPTPP poses a serious public health risk, makes us complicit in untold environmental harm and is “another nail in the coffin”

for UK farmers, as one constituent put it to me last week. I am deeply concerned about the livelihoods of farmers, who will be exposed to increased competition from lower standard farm inputs, meaning that many domestic farmers may struggle to compete.

Anthony Mangnall: Further to the point I made earlier, does the hon. Lady not recognise that the report on the CPTPP by the Trade and Agriculture Commission, which was set up all those years ago because people were worried about what was going to be in the Australia agreement—it is set up on a constitutional or statutory footing, is there to review all our trade agreements, and includes people such as Nick von Westenholz from the NFU and a number of other members from the agriculture community—did not find that it was damaging to farmers across this country? If that report is to be believed, would she not have done well to tell her constituent that this is not the case, rather than allowing that fear to run wild?

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Member for those interesting points.

I am concerned about the negative impact that this Bill has on modern innovative and sustainable agribusiness. I am concerned about the worsening of the UK's environmental impact, and the fading net zero commitments that this Government are shying away from. I am concerned about the human rights implications that my constituents, as consumers, may be made to stomach. I have many constituents working in the agrifood industry who feel they have been misled by this Tory Administration. One farmer told me last week that

“this Government says one thing with its many mouths and then does something completely different”.

We ask our farmers to maintain high welfare and environmental standards—and rightly so—but some signatories, such as Mexico, have almost none. Food security expert Professor Chris Elliott told me:

“It's absolutely not a level playing field in any stretch of the imagination”.

We Liberal Democrats agree with the NFU and the World Wildlife Fund in demanding core production standards for agrifood imports, which would uphold the ban on hormone treatment for cattle and prevent the import of food containing any of the 119 pesticides banned in the UK—to give just two examples. Which? surveys show that 84% of the country agrees with us, and I urge the Government to adopt this measure.

Anthony Mangnall: I am sorry, but I just feel that this matter should be hammered home. The opening summary of the Trade and Agriculture Commission report on the CPTPP states:

“Question 1: Does CPTPP require the UK to change its levels of statutory protection in relation to (a) animal or plant life or health, (b) animal welfare, and (c) environmental protection?”

The answer from the Trade and Agriculture Commission is:

“No. CPTPP does not require the UK to change its levels of statutory protection in relation to (a) animal or plant life or health, (b) animal welfare, or (c) environmental protection.”

This is not going to damage them, so the hon. Member must go back to her constituents and reassure them, rather than allow this mistruth to run wild across the countryside.

Sarah Dyke: The hon. Member makes an interesting point, but my view is about what the future will bring.

I have spoken in this place about the concerns I have regarding the mental health of farmers and farm workers, and the situation that farmers face is stark. In 2021, over a third of farmers surveyed by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution were “probably or possibly depressed”. Trade deals implemented since the Tory Brexit arrangement are causing significant financial stress and uncertainty to many agrifood businesses. Dairy, beef and poultry producers have approached me for help, fearing that they may not be in business by the summer. One farmer in Castle Cary told me last week that “we farmers are the ones who stump up the cost”.

I am proud to have some of the country's oldest cheddar producers in my constituency, such as Wyke Farms near Bruton, and many new artisan cheese producers, like Feltham's Farm in Horsington, but even award-winning cheeseries are not safe from the toxic tendrils of this deal. The effects will be felt by businesses in the supply chain as well, such as Sycamore Process Engineering, a growing local business based in Sparkford, where 67 local people work; and if those businesses' customers go bust, so will they. Losing agrifood businesses would irreversibly alter our rural way of life.

The farmer in Castle Cary also spoke of the “hidden cost of cheap food”,

and one of those costs is welfare, both human and animal. I echo the words of my noble Friend Baroness Bakewell about the threats to indigenous peoples in palm oil producing forests, which the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has mentioned. International Labour Organisation standards are not incumbent on signatories to this deal. We should have grave concerns about suspiciously under-priced food landing in our market, when the average Vietnamese harvest worker gets £5.50 per hour, according to the Economic Research Institute.

How can we know whether the people producing this food have been paid at all? The egg producers in Mexico, who will undercut my constituents by about a third, are subjecting their chickens to horrendous living conditions, and are themselves at the mercy of powerful cartels. They live in “slavery-like conditions”, according to *El País* this month, where cartels have

“taken over all links of the supply chain”,

and

“violence and extortion add to the ravages of climate change”.

Is this the sort of modern trade we want to support?

Anthony Mangnall: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Dyke: I will not.

I want to end with a stark and urgent warning. Last month, the Food Standards Agency had to issue a health warning after a rise in salmonella cases from Polish eggs and poultry meat, with 200 cases reported in 2023. That risk only grows when we open the floodgates to eggs and poultry produced to lower standards. Professor Elliott warned me about antibiotics deployed en masse without veterinary approval, Government control, or knowledge of the antibiotics' provenance. Such use and abuse of antibiotics is part of a frightening health picture. Professor Elliott cautioned that

“most countries do not have the infrastructure, regulations or oversight of drugs or pathogens—we could be opening up Pandora's box.”

[Sarah Dyke]

Batch-testing imports just will not work. Antibiotic resistance will spread from plate to platelet, and we would have a hard time swallowing that unpalatable morsel.

My constituents have record low trust in the Government. Removing water from the egg of an imprisoned chicken, drugged up on antibiotics that it did not need, and shipping that egg 5,000 miles to put into pancake mix and insipid sandwiches, is what my constituents have come to expect from this Tory Administration. Many of my constituents will not stomach toxic Tory trade deals, and we must urgently renegotiate them and have more mandatory parliamentary powers for future deals. We cannot afford the health cost to our population, the carbon cost to the planet, and the financial cost to our farmers. We have the chance to be world leaders in modern, world-beating, innovative, sustainable agriculture, and to proudly keep our high standards and improve our food security. Let us not lose that opportunity.

8.1 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is an honour and privilege to close today's enthralling debate on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition. Tonight, as we consider Second Reading of this important Bill, it is essential to balance our support for it with a critical eye. Labour supports CPTPP accession, albeit with reservations, and this Government are known to promise "oven-ready" deals that often break more ground in rhetoric than in reality. The Labour party recognises the UK's untapped trade potential, and is committed to harnessing it. However, we must acknowledge the Government's over-estimation of the CPTPP benefits. Initially they suggested a 0.08% GDP boost over 10 years, but recent forecasts have downgraded that to a mere 0.04% in the long run. To ensure that trade is a force for good, we must subject such deals to rigorous scrutiny, and commit to progress on climate change, human rights, and labour conditions globally.

As hon. Members have stated, the devil is indeed in the detail. The failure to deliver on manifesto commitments, including agreements with India and the US, highlights the need for a realistic evaluation of CPTPP's benefits. As illustrated by the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), there is no denying the importance of closer ties with Indo-Pacific allies, especially in these uncertain times. However, although CPTPP offers trade advantages such as rules of origin provisions and potential for improved terms, grand Government claims of "unparalleled opportunities" and "glittering" post-Brexit prizes must be substantiated and grounded. It is my duty to ensure not just that the skeleton of the deal accedes, but that British business thrives as a result.

In his excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) highlighted the concerns of our creative industries, and the hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) and for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) explained concerns surrounding farming and China. Considering that we already have free trade agreements with nine CPTPP members, the immediate benefits of formally joining the CPTPP might seem limited. The Government's projection of a mere 0.06% boost to the UK's GDP from CPTPP calls for a measured evaluation of its actual economic impact.

This deal puts us at the heart of a dynamic group of economies, but it is crucial that we do not stop pushing for more ambitious growth. We do not have that privilege after 14 long years of Conservative rule.

Our stagnated economy needs a much needed boost. Indeed, in the last 10 years, Britain has had the second worst export record in the G7. That is why change is necessary.

Having spoken to British exporters in my constituency and across our country, I know that the challenges they face post Brexit are substantial, and increased barriers, red tape and bureaucracy have been a significant hindrance. The Bill must be part of a larger strategy to revitalise our global trade presence, yet Labour sees untapped potential here.

For example, we recognise the immense contribution that small and medium-sized businesses make to our economy, with a £2.4 trillion contribution and employment for 16.7 million people. However, the Government's approach to supporting those enterprises in expanding their export potential lacks clear strategic direction and coherence. Labour's plan for small businesses aims to address those gaps, ensuring that SMEs have the necessary support and framework to flourish in international markets. The CPTPP symbolises international co-operation and unlocks untapped SME potential, with around 375,000 UK SMEs not currently engaged in international trade representing a £290 billion export opportunity. There is indeed untapped potential waiting to be harnessed. The Bill also highlights the regulatory burdens faced by businesses, and we must reduce the complex web of regulations. It further lowers tariffs to enhance market access and choice for businesses sourcing from CPTPP countries, potentially benefiting consumers. However, it is important to note that that may expose some UK businesses to increased competition from CPTPP exporters.

Let us look more closely at the impact than at the wording of this deal. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) eloquently explained, the inclusion of investor state dispute settlement mechanisms in the CPTPP raises grave concerns about the influence of foreign investors. We must scrutinise those provisions to protect our sovereignty and democratic principles.

Our commitment to environmental stewardship is critical. The World Wildlife Fund has expressed concerns about the CPTPP's impact on deforestation, particularly palm oil, which could conflict with our commitments in the Environment Act 2021. We must ensure that our trade policies align with robust environmental protection. It is essential that our trade deals do not undermine our efforts to combat the climate crisis. The Government's optimistic portrayal of the CPTPP must be balanced against a history of over-promising and under-delivering in trade deals. Figures from the respected independent Office for Budget Responsibility suggest that the CPTPP might contribute only a marginal 0.04% to our GDP.

The Government hail the CPTPP as a transformative deal and a potential panacea for our post-Brexit trade woes, but let us be clear that while they paint a rosy picture of economic prosperity, the empirical evidence suggests otherwise, as was excellently elaborated on by the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge

Hill (Liam Byrne). We were promised sunlit uplands post Brexit, yet here we are squinting to see the benefits through a fog of uncertainty.

Anthony Mangnall: That is not empirical evidence. A forecast is not empirical fact—it is a forecast—and these are modelling exercises by their very nature. I challenge the hon. Member to give me proof from any trade agreement, with the value at the beginning versus what it was at the five-year mark and the 10-year mark. Nearly every trade agreement, whether signed by the European Union, the UK or the Americans, has always been undervalued because the emphasis is on businesses and communities taking advantage of it.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. Just as the Government's aspirations go by those figures, we must likewise respect the figures of the Office for Budget Responsibility, as it is a lot more rigorous in its exercise. We cannot discard its figures; indeed, we must dwell on them as the wider British industry and the economy look closely at those figures. They are the best figures we have, rather than anything that the Government or anybody else have put on the table.

It crucial to acknowledge the broader context of the UK's export performance. In recent years, we have seen a concerning decline in our export capabilities, raising questions about how effectively the CPTPP can reverse the trend. The Bill must be part of a larger strategy to revitalise our global trade presence and not be just a stand-alone solution. The deal was negotiated by the party that has hiked trade barriers, crashed our economy, driven up food prices, engaged in damaging megaphone diplomacy, increased bureaucracy for our businesses trading internationally, and much worse besides. In contrast, Labour's objective is to increase trade and international co-operation, and we will be closely watching the execution of this deal.

The Government have repeatedly failed on their promises on the international stage. We support international trade and global co-operation, but that must translate into tangible benefits for British jobs, consumers and our overall global economic prosperity. That trade also cannot come at the cost of our moral and ethical commitment to, for example, human rights, labour rights, food standards and the environment. Labour's approach to the CPTPP will be one of cautious optimism, balanced by a realistic assessment of its potential impact on our national interests.

As we edge closer to a much awaited election that will help to put the British public out of their misery, the Labour party stands as the true party of business and trade, advocating for agreements that genuinely benefit the UK's economy. We support the CPTPP but remain vigilant about ensuring that it aligns with our vision of a thriving, globally competitive Britain. We are committed to a future where Great Britain not only engages with the world but leads in a fair, equitable and profitable trade relationship with our partners around the world.

8.14 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): It is a pleasure to reply to what has been a wide-ranging and often well-informed debate. The Bill's passage will enable the UK to meet international obligations on accession to the CPTPP, thereby unlocking the next chapter in the

country's proud tradition of trading freely with the world. Acting as a gateway to growth, the agreement will place the UK at the centre of a vast free trade area currently comprising 11 sovereign countries. For UK consumers, reductions in tariffs could lead to cheaper imports, better choice and higher quality products, all while protections in critical areas are maintained. With more than 99% of current goods exports to CPTPP parties being eligible for zero tariffs, businesses in every corner of the UK stand to benefit.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I will lightly sidestep the party political debate. As the Minister knows, my interest is in Mexico—I have chaired the all-party parliamentary group on Mexico for five years, and am now proudly the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Mexico—which is the world's 16th largest economy and will be the ninth largest by 2030. That offers great opportunities, not least for my region, the north-west, which trades more with Mexico than any other region. Plenty of labour rights are included in the CPTPP; the question is how they will be enforced. For instance, every party to the CPTPP holds obligations under the International Labour Organisation. The question is how we trade more as well as raise protections through the CPTPP.

Greg Hands: I thought for a moment that the hon. Member was going to verge off into football. I was going to congratulate him on his constituency team, Liverpool, beating Fulham last week. In any case, I thank him. He was recently appointed the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Mexico, which is a really important position. In general, Mexico presents a great opportunity. Our rolled-over trade deal with Mexico dates from a long time ago—about 2002-03.

The hon. Member will know that the CPTPP includes a comprehensive chapter on labour, with binding provisions on fundamental labour rights, minimum wage, hours of work and health and safety. All parties to the CPTPP are members of the ILO, and they are not allowed to derogate from their domestic labour laws to give them an unfair trade advantage. That is how the labour chapter in the CPTPP works. I look forward to discussions with him, and to doing everything we can to work together to boost trade with Mexico.

Before I extoll the benefits of the agreement still further, I will say that it is a pleasure to be back at the Department, and to see the further progress being made tonight towards the UK being the 12th party to the CPTPP. This is a tremendously exciting moment for both the UK and global trade policy—one that the Department and I personally have been building towards for many years. Back in about 2017, one of the earliest decisions in the Department under the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox), was to explore accession to the trans-Pacific partnership, as the CPTPP was then known.

Richard Graham: May I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work that he has done, both on this arrangement in general, and more specifically in promoting our mutual trade and investment agreements with nations in Asia? It is the 67th year of Malaysian independence; this is the first trade and investment agreement that we have ever had with that very encouraging far-eastern nation, with which we can develop a great and stronger relationship. Does he agree?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is quite right. Of course, successive Secretaries of State have pursued that relationship, including the current Secretary of State, who is personally obviously very committed. I think that I have made two visits to Malaysia in my time as Trade Minister, and we are really excited about having a better trade relationship with Malaysia.

It seemed a logical move to join the CPTPP, as it included many of our global free trading cohort, including Japan, Australia and New Zealand, but it did not have the controversial aspects of free trade zones in Europe, such as free movement, financial contributions and dynamic alignment of rules. As the Secretary of State said, the agreement will grow. Joining the CPTPP will be great news for the UK as an independent trading nation, and for UK goods and services exporters. They include beverage producers in Scotland—I did not hear the SNP extolling that virtue—machinery manufacturers in Wales, and car manufacturers in Northern Ireland and the west midlands.

According to 2022 data, the UK is the world's second largest services exporter—a point also raised by my hon. Friends on the Government Benches. Joining the CPTPP will help minimise unnecessary data flow barriers, empower UK services exporters and encourage inward financial investment—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). Overall, it will provide us with a new presence in the wider Indo-Pacific region—a region of paramount geopolitical and economic importance, and one that is expected to account for 54% of global economic growth by 2050.

I warmly welcome the constructive comments made and the support from sectors across the country. In her opening speech, the Secretary of State quoted the president of the National Farmers Union and the director-general of the Institute of Export and International Trade. I would like to add just one more quote, from the Federation of Small Businesses. We had an intervention earlier about SMEs; the FSB said that it is

“very pleased to see the UK officially join”.

In FSB research, 45% of small exporters said that access to this market will be important for future growth.

Today we have heard a number of important points raised, and I will try to answer as many as possible in the time available. I remind the House of the specific purpose of the Bill: to enable the implementation of aspects of the CPTPP when the UK accedes, specifically relating to chapters on intellectual property, Government procurement and technical barriers to trade.

First of all, we heard from the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), who gave us his familiar explication of how we are not doing enough trade deals, even though he has voted against every single one of the deals that we have done. We heard about his attitude to Canada, and his faux outrage about the idea that there might be a weakening in the existing trade deal with Canada. We heard that from the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). They also said that the Government are letting down people by not having an effective continuation of the Canada trade deal. We can differ on that, but the difference in the case of the hon. Member for Harrow West is that he voted against the Canada trade deal in the first place.

He is now taking time to complain about the weakening of an agreement that he did not support from the very off.

On China, the hon. Member for Harrow West has been reminded about the Auckland principles, and that all countries acceding to the CPTPP must accede to the high standards of the agreement, have a history of conforming with trade agreements and command the consensus of the parties. The investor-state dispute settlement, which was also raised by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), is in the agreement, but I remind the House that the UK has never lost a case. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington called it hubristic to mention that, but it is a fact, and the agreement never prevents the right to regulate. On performers' rights, raised by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green), the CPTPP is an existing agreement, and changes will have to be made.

John McDonnell: I have made this point on previous occasions, but I just want to understand the logic of the Government's position of allowing the ISDS in this particular deal, but trying to avoid it in the free trade agreement with Canada.

Greg Hands: These are all matters for negotiation. What happens in one negotiation will not always be the same as what happens in another; it is impossible to compare them. I can say that we already have ISDS provisions with seven of the 11 CPTPP members.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I will not, because I am trying to respond to the right hon. Gentleman's earlier points. On performers' rights, raised by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, we expect the practical impact to be small. The Intellectual Property Office is carrying out a consultation on how the provisions will be implemented.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) made a characteristically upbeat and excellent speech, pointing out that the region has £12 trillion in GDP, how the UK will be—and is—at the forefront of global trade, and how the deal will make no alteration to our standards.

From the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), we heard a familiar tale of woe. He failed to stick up for Scotland and to point out all the trade benefits for Scotland. He said that he has been against every single UK trade deal, and that is correct, but he failed to mention that he has also been against every single EU trade deal that has ever been negotiated. He wishes to rejoin the EU and be subject to those very trade deals that he spent years campaigning against. He was against the Canada deal, the South Africa deal, the Japan deal, the Singapore deal and the Korea deal.

The hon. Member failed to mention the particular benefits to Scotland. He was wrong when he said that the GDP increase is £2 billion—it is £2 billion per annum. Then, he went down an extraordinary road of talking about eggs. Ninety per cent. of our egg consumption comes from domestic production. All eggs are subject to sanitary and phytosanitary checks, and from Wednesday, EU eggs will be, too, under the border target operating

model. We have imported hardly any eggs at all from CPTPP countries since 2015. I think he mentioned eggs from Mexico, but there has been not a single import of an egg from Mexico since 2005. This is the most extraordinary scaremongering. The Trade and Agriculture Commission said:

“we found it was unlikely that eggs from CPTPP parties...would be imported into the UK”.

The hon. Member is sacrificing the interests of those selling Scotch whisky and other high-quality Scottish produce by starting scare stories about the importation of eggs, which are not coming to this country. He mentioned workers’ rights; I have already said that there is a comprehensive labour chapter.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, made a constructive speech. He said that the deal was good for farmers, good for whisky and had a good digital chapter. He is right that we are doing more trade deals—we are going further with Switzerland, Turkey, South Korea and others. He is right on the scale of the CPTPP and growth. On pesticides, there is no change to our right to regulate or to our import standards. We set the maximum limits on pesticides—there is no change to that.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham said that we already have deals with nine of the 11 members. Well, it depends on what is in the deal. As I pointed out in response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), the existing deal with Mexico is very old—it goes back more than 20 years. The CPTPP is a very modern deal. We can get a lot more done with a very modern deal than with a deal that is many decades old. She complained about the lack of parliamentary scrutiny. There have been two oral statements, 16 written ministerial statements, and Ministers and officials have appeared before five Select Committees to give evidence on the CPTPP. That is a lot of parliamentary scrutiny over the years. On palm oil, the TAC said that it is unlikely that the CPTPP will lead to an increase in palm oil being grown on deforested land. We have had impact assessments galore, but I am happy to look at the public health assessment mentioned by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington.

Finally, we heard a speech from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke), which was alarmist in its impact on farmers. The NFU supports the agreement. She described the “toxic tendrils” of the deal, and even blamed “insipid sandwiches” on this Tory Government. There are many things that I am not quite sure can be blamed on any Government, and the quality of sandwiches is going too far. She started verging into what sounded a little like conspiracy theories.

The Bill is the next step in the creation of the outward-looking and internationalist UK that we envisage for our country’s future. Through the UK’s accession to the CPTPP, the Government will place the UK at the centre of a modern, progressive and values-based partnership that spans the Americas and Asia, and which other economies are queueing up to join. It is the gateway to new business opportunities and greater consumer choice benefits that will be felt in every corner of the UK. While the legislation may be narrow, it is crucial to the UK’s ability to accede to the CPTPP. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

TRADE (COMPREHENSIVE AND PROGRESSIVE AGREEMENT FOR TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 22 February 2024.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Robert Largan.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Sentencing Act 2020 (Amendment of Schedule 21) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 23 October 2023, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Robert Largan.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the draft Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (Remedial) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 18 October 2023, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Robert Largan.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Local Government Finance Act 1988 (Prescription of Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 11 December 2023, be approved.—(*Robert Largan.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LEGAL SERVICES

That the draft Legal Services Act 2007 (Approved Regulator) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 23 October 2023, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Robert Largan.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 27 November 2023, be approved.—(*Robert Largan.*)

Question agreed to.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Dan Carden be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Ms Marie Rimmer be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Road Traffic Deaths: Police Investigations

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Robert Largan.*)

8.30 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the important topic of police investigations into road traffic deaths. I do so this evening in support of and in tribute to my constituents George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson, who have campaigned tirelessly on road safety over the past 25 years.

I first met the Galli-Atkinsons shortly after I was elected as the Member of Parliament for Rugby in 2010. The family had recently moved from London to Rugby. They came to tell me about the awards they had established in memory of their daughter Livia, who was killed in a road traffic collision in 1998. I remember our meeting very well. As we spoke, I was struck by their strong commitment to making our roads safer so that other families can be spared the tragedy they have had to bear.

Their daughter Livia was born at Chase Farm Hospital in Enfield on 30 October 1981. She was growing into a beautiful young woman—thoughtful, studious, hard-working, kind and with a clear understanding of right and wrong. Her hobbies included riding and ballet. She loved “Gone with the Wind” and had a dry sense of humour.

On 12 January 1998, when she was 16 years old, Livia left home at 6.55 pm to walk to her Monday evening ballet class, which was due to take place at 7.15 pm on Windmill Hill in Enfield. As she was walking along the pavement leading to the studio, a car mounted it and careered into her, having first injured another pedestrian. Livia sadly died at the scene at 7.40 pm. At the time, George and Giulietta were completely unaware of what had happened. I remember George telling me how he had arranged to collect Livia after her class, and on his way there he saw blue lights flashing. He spoke of how the thought crossed his mind that it must be sad that for the relatives of the person being attended to by the emergency services.

When the case came to trial and the driver was found guilty by unanimous verdict of the charge of causing death by dangerous driving on 6 November 1998, I think everybody expected a custodial sentence. The judge, however, considered the case to be borderline with careless driving and accepted the defendant’s last-minute decision not to testify. The judge declared that there was no benefit in sending the defendant to jail, as he had previously been of good character, and said nor would it serve justice. The defendant received a £2,000 fine, 10 points on his licence and a five-year ban from driving.

An appeal against this leniency was immediately lodged with the Attorney General by the family and the Crown Prosecution Service. As he did not consider the sentence to be unduly lenient, the Attorney General declined the appeal. In 2000, the family took the Attorney General to judicial review on the grounds of unreasonableness. The first attempt failed. At the second attempt, the High Court found that, for the purpose of the hearings, it had been an unduly lenient sentence, and that while the Attorney General had made an error of judgment in denying the appeal, he had not made an error of law.

Still disappointed, in 2002 the family turned to the European Court of Human Rights to test articles 2, 3, 13 and 14. Again, Livia's case failed. All avenues in the criminal process having been exhausted, the family turned to civil redress and the civil case succeeded. I understand that everyone who has read about Livia's case agrees that the sentence was very light.

The inspiration for an award in Livia's memory arose from the work of the three police officers in charge of the case, who were described by George and Giulietta as "superlative". At that time, there was no public accolade for traffic police officers. The award was established by Livia's parents in gratitude to the road traffic officers who investigated Livia's case. George and Giulietta recognised that they fulfilled the expectations of professional service and integrity, and they formed the criteria and mandate for the Livia award. Through their own experiences, the family have, most admirably, turned their grief into something very positive.

The Livia award for professionalism and service to justice has grown from an award that was first presented in the Livia memorial garden as a memento of personal gratitude, into a milestone in the Metropolitan police's history and annual agenda. The Livia memorial garden in Enfield was opened by the then hon. Member for Enfield, Stephen Twigg, in October 1999. The 100 square metre derelict site, adjacent to the pavement where Livia was killed, was transformed into a haven for public use. Stephen remains closely involved with the Livia award to this day.

The award has been endorsed over the years by all the Prime Ministers since that time, from Tony Blair through to Gordon Brown, David Cameron, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and Boris Johnson, along with every single Metropolitan Police Commissioner since 2000, and, most especially and significantly, by the Metropolitan police's traffic command and its officers. The award is made annually to the Metropolitan police officer in the roads and transport policing command, serious collision investigation unit who is judged to have provided the most meritorious service to road death investigation, either in a specific case or sustained through several investigations, or by providing the family of a road crash victim with outstanding service.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is making an incredibly powerful speech. Having inquired about what goes on behind the scenes when investigating fatal road traffic collisions following a particularly tragic case in my constituency, I know that one thing that distresses families is the length of time it takes to investigate a collision and bring a case to court. West Yorkshire police do fantastic work and I pay tribute to them, as he is paying tribute to some of the officers he has referenced. One challenge is that it takes three years to train a forensic collision investigator. The challenge of getting the capacity in those training courses to train officers, so that there are enough incredibly talented and experienced officers to do this important work, is creating some of those delays. Does he share my thought that that is something for the Government to consider, so that the training can be undertaken in a timely fashion to ensure that we have the right number of special investigators and we get justice for families who are hit the hardest by these tragedies?

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Lady makes some important and pertinent points. I will go on to talk about the work of some of the officers I have heard about as a judge for the award. She is right to talk about the specialism of the role and the importance of effective training, and the time it takes for officers to achieve that level of expertise.

There are three criteria for the Livia award: service to justice when outstanding detective ability is displayed, professionalism when there is clearly excellence in the investigation, and service to the families of the victims. A 25th anniversary event was held in November last year, and I am proud to have been asked to be a member of the judging panel in recent years. It is worth pointing out that throughout those 25 years, the panel has been independent of the Metropolitan police and, indeed, independent of George and Giulietta. It consists of professionals and former professionals including solicitors and barristers, a former court reporter for a major newspaper, former senior police officers and, usually, a Member of the House of Lords and a Member of Parliament. It is also significant that nominations are made by colleagues of officers involved in the investigation of serious road transport collisions. The nominations are initially in writing, and are followed by interviews with those who are nominated.

In reading these accounts and hearing from the nominees each year—this is relevant to what was said by the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch)—I have been struck by the professionalism and service to justice that each of the candidates portrays. I have read, and heard face-to-face, accounts from police officers who have had to attend the most harrowing incidents. It was particularly interesting for me, as a provincial MP from a small town in the midlands, to understand some of the challenges of policing in a capital as large and sophisticated as London. Often, the people who have to pick up the pieces and bring families together are police officers, and I have heard a great deal from family liaison officers—a role that I had not heard of before my involvement with the Livia award. Being a member of the panel has given me an insight into a world that I would not otherwise have seen.

I want to provide a flavour of the calibre of the candidates, and the kind of work that they have had to do, through a couple of case studies. The first is the 2023 Livia award winner, Detective Constable Davina Nash, who had been the collision investigator for a serious injury collision that took place in Acton, London, in June 2021. The collision resulted in potentially life-changing injuries to a two-and-a-half-year-old girl who was with her mother and brother, crossing a major road showing a green light at a pedestrian crossing. She was on a toy scooter when, despite the signal being red for traffic and a stream of stationary cars waiting for the signals to change, a moped rider approached the crossing at speed, overtook the stationary cars and collided with the little girl, who was part of the way across the crossing. Her injuries were so severe that medical staff thought she would die, or would be left with a severe brain injury.

As family liaison officer for the family, DC Nash had to pick up the pieces. She carried out a meticulous and thorough investigation, and her work led to a successful prosecution for causing serious injury by dangerous driving, driving while over the cannabis limit, and driving with no licence and no insurance. The judge imposed

[Mark Pawsey]

the maximum sentence possible after a guilty plea reduction, which was 42 months' imprisonment, and commented that the sentence was nowhere near high enough given the gravity of the little girl's injuries.

The second case study refers to the work of another 2023 award nominee, Police Constable Ed Raymond. On Sunday 10 July 2022, a fatal road traffic collision occurred in New Kent Road, Southwark. The 24-year-old driver was unlicensed and at almost twice the drink-drive limit when the car that he was driving smashed into a pedicab, throwing the passenger from the vehicle and killing her. The driver of the rickshaw sustained life-changing injuries.

PC Raymond was employed as a family liaison officer—such an important role—and he went to extraordinary lengths to support the victim's family. In this case, the defendant pleaded guilty to causing death by dangerous driving and a number of other offences, and was sentenced to just over nine years in November 2022. However, in the first case of its kind, the case was reviewed by the Attorney General and an unduly lenient sentence appeal was heard at the Royal Courts of Justice in January 2023. This was due to the changes in sentencing guidelines for death by dangerous driving that came into force in June 2022. The appeal resulted in the first stated case and the sentence was increased by a third. The driver of the vehicle is now serving 12 years in prison.

PC Raymond's role was to ensure that the victim's family were fully supported throughout, and he was able to establish a very special relationship with them. A year on from the collision, he joined the family in raising over £9,000 for various charities, one of which is Brake, which provides support for bereaved families who have lost loved ones in road traffic collisions. I give those examples as an illustration of the severity of the cases that officers are having to deal with.

George and Giulietta have not initiated these awards over 25 years just for the sake of the awards; they have also fought tirelessly for more appropriate punishment for those found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving. On both fronts they have been incredibly successful. It has been an honour to work alongside the Galli-Atkinsons and to see how their energy and dedication to road safety has inspired and changed the work of the police in this area. As a consequence of their pressure, there are now three specialist units within the Metropolitan police: the roads and transport policing command, the serious collision investigation unit and the forensic collision investigation unit. All are working tirelessly on the vision to achieve safer roads and fairer sentencing.

The roads and transport policing command is the largest operational command unit in the Metropolitan police and, working in partnership with Transport for London, its focus is to deny criminals use of the roads, and to reduce serious injury and road deaths within London. The roads policing teams work 24/7, 365 days a year, responding to serious and fatal collisions and incidents as well as targeting collision hotspots and educating road users.

Education is a theme that George and Giulietta have picked up. They have been involved with many successful campaigns and programmes as well as supporting road safety charities such as RoadPeace, Brake and Victim Support. I would like to refer particularly to Safe Drive

Stay Alive, which George helped to set up in Enfield in 2008. Positive feedback grew, and more and more London boroughs became interested in delivering that brand of road safety education to a range of people that it was important to influence, including learner drivers in their sixth-form years. This programme, initiated by George, eventually covered 19 London boroughs, working in partnership with councils, emergency services and the roads police.

As the local MP in Rugby, I am delighted that the programme was introduced in my constituency in 2017—George and Giulietta having come up to the midlands—when funding was provided by the Warwickshire chief constable. I have seen that Safe Drive Stay Alive is a professional, high-impact and effective stage show. The objective of this road safety initiative is to show easily influenced young people why, as young drivers, they and their passengers are so vulnerable in their early years on the roads, and to show them what they can do to reduce this vulnerability. I have absolutely no doubt that those messages have saved lives.

George has also been involved with Learn2Live in Hertfordshire—an initiative similar to Safe Drive Stay Alive that reached more than 7,000 students. He was subsequently asked by the Ministry of Defence in 2019 to be involved with its road safety initiative, Survive the Drive, in London and Surrey.

Over 25 years, George and Giulietta have contributed to countless public consultations on road safety legislation and enforcement, and their influence has borne fruit. In 2011, the then Member for Enfield, Southgate, David Burrowes—who was a judging panel member for a number of years, and who worked closely with George and Giulietta—successfully campaigned for a change to dangerous driving legislation to increase the maximum sentence to five years.

To this day, the couple are campaigning tirelessly with Members on both sides of the House to ensure that the road safety investigation branch, promised by the Government, comes to fruition. I am delighted to say that in 2023, for the first time and after much campaigning in which George and Giulietta have been instrumental, the Home Office included roads policing in its strategic policing requirement, starting at paragraph 166:

“Roads policing is responsible for the enforcement of traffic laws, detection, deterrence and the response to illegal or dangerous activity on the roads... Roads policing capabilities play an essential role in tackling the use of the roads network by terrorist threats and serious and organised criminals involved in county lines drug transportation, modern slavery and human trafficking. They are also essential in managing incidents caused by public disorder or civil emergencies.”

George and Giulietta are truly an inspiration, and their energy and commitment to road safety, fair sentencing and proper recognition of outstanding police officers in this area of policing deserve high recognition and praise. Rugby is incredibly lucky to have two such people in our midst, and it has been my honour to have been invited to join Giulietta's work on the Livia award.

I have found it inspirational, and deeply challenging, to learn about the work of road collision investigators. The role is sometimes overlooked within the police service, but it is vital to the pursuit of justice for those affected by road traffic incidents. The work that George and Giulietta have done to maintain the high profile of the Livia award throughout its 25 years has done much

to highlight this valuable policing role, and has recognised many police officers who have gone above and beyond the call of duty in supporting families such as the Galli-Atkinsons.

8.53 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this Adjournment debate. Every road traffic death is a tragedy, and I strongly echo what he said about the impact on those affected. I join him in thanking the police for the excellent work they do up and down the country every day to keep our roads safe, and to respond to fatal and serious road traffic incidents. These are often extraordinarily distressing incidents, but it is the role of the police to investigate them in a clear-minded and thorough way. The investigations can often be complex and technical, but the public rightly expect the police to undertake them.

I would like to convey my deepest sympathy to my hon. Friend's constituents, George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson, for the tragic loss of their daughter Livia. I have been very moved, as I am sure we all have, by his description of the family's work since the tragic death of their daughter to try to bring some good out of an awful personal tragedy.

I wish to put on record my sincere thanks to George and Giulietta for the work they have done these past 25 years to promote and campaign for road traffic safety, including in establishing and perpetuating the Livia award for professionalism and service to justice. As my hon. Friend has said, it has played such an important role in highlighting the work that collision investigators and family liaison officers do—in trying to bring some answers following tragedy and in looking after the families in their hour of darkness as best they can.

Police officers up and down the country show, on a daily basis, enormous commitment and dedication in responding to fatal road traffic incidents, and it is right that their efforts are recognised. Again, I thank the Galli-Atkinsons for what they have done to support and promote this work, and to campaign for road safety. What they have done has truly made a difference over the past 25 years, as my hon. Friend set out. They

should be incredibly proud that they have shown such courage, fortitude and determination to bring such good out of a terrible tragedy.

Of course, many families respond in that way. As a constituency Member of Parliament, and in my role as the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, I, like other Members, often meet families whose lives have been touched by tragedy; and we find that often they do respond as the Galli-Atkinson family have, by trying to bring some good out of their tragedy in order to help other people who find themselves in the same situation. It is important that we, as Members of Parliament and Ministers, listen carefully to what families who have had such terrible experiences have to say, to make sure that we in Parliament and in Government can learn from them. I therefore repeat my thanks to the Galli-Atkinson family for their campaigning, which does make, and has made, a difference; their voice has absolutely been heard.

Let me make one or two more general remarks about road safety, which is, of course, a priority for the Government. We continue to work to make our roads safer. Britain's roads are among the safest in the world, but we are not complacent. In 2022, there were, sadly, 1,711 fatal road collisions—each one a life cut short. We need to make sure we do everything we can to make our roads safer and to tighten the law where it needs to be tighter. We need to do that to make sure, first, that accidents are avoided and, secondly, that where a driver has been careless, dangerous or reckless, or has driven under the influence of drugs or drink, they are brought to justice, that families can see justice being done, that there is a deterrent effect and that those sentences can be felt across society.

Although we have safe roads compared with many other countries, the work is certainly not done—there is more to do. By working with Members from both sides of the House—especially those whose constituents, like those of my hon. Friend, have experienced tragedy—and listening to them and to their experiences, I know that we can do even more. All of us will work together to make sure that that happens.

Question put and agreed to.

8.57 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 29 January 2024

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

Next General Election

4.30 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 641904 relating to the next general election.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I am pleased to introduce the petition and give voice to its hundreds of thousands of petitioners, as well as pretty much everybody I have spoken to recently regarding the current state of this country. The petition calls for an immediate general election in the light of the chaos of the current Government. It is clear in its demand:

“The Prime Minister should call an immediate general election to allow the British public to have their say on how we are governed, we should not be made to wait until January 2025”.

It goes on:

“Consistent opinion polling has shown the British public have lost confidence in the current government. The NHS is in crisis, the asylum system is broken, there are delays at the ports, and institutions are failing. The British people should be given a say on what to do next.”

I pay tribute to David Nash, who started the petition. More than 286,000 people have signed it—383 of them my constituents in Gower—and the number is climbing as we speak. That demonstrates the strength of feeling of dissatisfaction and dismay at the Government and the turmoil that we find ourselves in in this country. That dismay is not new. Members will be aware that this is not the first petition or debate of its kind. In October 2022, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) opened a discussion in this hall on a similar petition, which received almost 1 million signatures. The fact that this is the second debate on an immediate general election in less than 18 months is about as strong an indicator as one can get of how much the governing party have lost the respect of the British people.

Let us remind ourselves of the situation surrounding the previous debate. Inflation had reached a 41% high; families were confronting a cost of living crisis and unaffordable energy bills; and there were record backlogs in our NHS. After becoming the fourth Conservative Prime Minister in six years, solely on votes from Conservative party members whose backing represented just 0.17% of all voters, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) delivered a mini Budget that caused complete market turmoil and led to further havoc with U-turns, reversals and the sacking of the then Chancellor.

Fast forward to now and the only thing that has changed is the Government's figurehead. Despite there being a new Prime Minister and promises of a new direction, chaos persists and continues to govern as matters get even worse for the country. That fact is glaringly obvious to just about everyone other than the Prime Minister, who is so out of touch that he continues to tell the public how good they have got it as they feel the country burning around them everywhere they turn.

British people continue to pay the price of the Conservatives' catastrophic mini Budget, delivered with absolutely no mandate from the British people. It triggered an economic meltdown and saw the pound plummet to its lowest level against the dollar in 37 years. At the time, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research said that the uncertainty caused by the fiscal event was directly pushing up longer-term borrowing costs, and it was right. Interest rates soared and families were forced to cope with higher mortgages, with the average mortgage up £240 a month. That is on top of the cost of living crisis, which continues to exert enormous pressure on families as they face higher food and energy bills.

The mini Budget shows the catastrophic consequences of behaving recklessly with the economy, but the extent of the Conservative Government's economic damage goes beyond that one disastrous event. The Government have presided over a period of national decline. We have had 11 growth plans from seven Chancellors, yet economic growth is stagnant. Under the Conservative Government, GDP growth has averaged 1.5% per year. This year we are forecast to be the slowest growing economy in the whole of the G7. National debt is at the highest level since the 1960s and has more than doubled since 2010.

Experts predict this will be the biggest tax-raising Parliament on record. There have been 25 Tory tax rises since the last election. Even after this month's tax changes, the average household is still set to be up to £1,200 worse off. Fourteen years of economic failure is having a devastating impact on the people of this country. With taxes eating into wages, mortgages rising, interest rates and inflation high, and prices in shops still going up, too many families are struggling to make ends meet.

This Parliament is on track to be the first in modern history in which living standards in this country have contracted. Household income growth is down by 3.1%. A report published just last week by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 14.4 million people were in poverty in 2021-22. That is 22% of people in the United Kingdom—let that number sink in. That included 8.1 million working-age adults, 4.2 million children and 2.1 million pensioners. That is completely unacceptable. The economic damage caused by this Government is leaving British people worse off, and it is most acutely felt by the most vulnerable in our society. Increasing numbers of children and pensioners reside in poverty, as this Government preside with no public mandate or democratic accountability for the policies they seek to pursue.

Although we have the biggest tax burden since the second world war, public services are crumbling. Never before have a British Government asked their people to pay so much for so little. Schools with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—are literally falling down, and a headteachers' union warned just last week that parents are taking their children out of those schools as a result. The RAAC failure is just one issue affecting schools in England. According to a National Audit Office report last year, 700,000 children are being taught in unsafe or ageing buildings.

The NHS is in crisis after more than a decade of Government mismanagement. With waiting lists totalling over 7.6 million, one in seven people in England are on NHS waiting lists—more than ever before. These people have put their lives on hold while they wait in pain and

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

discomfort for months or even years. The Conservative Government cut 2,000 GPs, and now patients find it impossible to get an appointment. Patients are waiting dangerously long for ambulances, and it is common for ambulances to queue outside hospitals for hours on end to hand over patients. The latest analysis of NHS England figures revealed that 420,000 patients had to wait 12 hours or more in A&E last year—a 20% increase on 2022. I know that sounds like a dystopian nightmare but, alarmingly, it is the reality of the current situation. Healthcare should be available for all who require it, but 14 years of Conservative failure means that people can no longer trust that the NHS will be there for them in their hour of need.

I could go on about how this Government have broken the asylum system, failed to clear the asylum backlog or end asylum hotel use, and spent £400 million of public money on a discredited, unworkable and immoral Rwanda plan without sending a single asylum seeker there. I could expand on how, despite their promises about being tough on crime, the Government are failing on law and order, with over 90% of crimes going unsolved, only 3.9% of sexual offences—of which 2.4% are rapes—resulting in a charge or summons, and record high fatal stabbings, as knife crime has soared 77% since 2015. I will leave those things just to a mention as I am conscious of the time that I have already spent outlining the Government's failures.

All the Conservative Government have to show for themselves is complete and utter chaos. They have overseen the degradation of standards in public life. Six by-elections were held last year, with a further two expected next month. After five Prime Ministers and seven Chancellors, the public are worse off. Granted, we live in a parliamentary democracy and it is not the first time that a Prime Minister has changed in the middle of a Parliament, but we are now on our third Prime Minister since the general election in 2019. Two of those were elected by Conservative MPs and members, rather than the electorate. That is discouraging for the British people, who have had no say in the direction of their governance or who their Prime Minister is.

In the debate on a similar petition back in October 2022, concerns were rightly raised about the lack of a mandate of the then Prime Minister, who was elected solely by Conservative party members. That Member then went on to claim the title of the shortest-serving Prime Minister this country has ever seen, after triggering an enormous economic crisis, so I think we can say that those concerns were definitely well founded. But our current Prime Minister has even less of a mandate to govern. He failed his own party's leadership contest and is now failing to serve the interests of the public—indeed, a recent YouGov poll puts the Government's disapproval rating at 66%. Perhaps he might be more successful at engaging the public elsewhere: if he does choose to call an immediate general election, he will have plenty of time to prepare for a starring role in "I'm a Celebrity".

It is no wonder that the Prime Minister cannot command the confidence of his country, given his inability to secure the assurances of his own party. I am a teacher myself, and he is like a supply teacher in charge of an unruly class. "Stand up and fight"—that phrase was repeated by the Leader of the House 19 times in a

speech to the Tory conference, with 12 of those in quick succession. She did not mean for her party's MPs to fight each other. The petition's signatories are expressing their anger at a governing party at war with itself and more focused on its in-fighting and psychodrama than meaningfully tackling the multiple crises that they lurch this country to and from.

The recent developments regarding steel are a prime example. The future of Port Talbot steelworks is integral to communities across south Wales, and so to many of my constituents. The Conservative Government spent half a billion pounds of taxpayers' money, only to make thousands redundant and leave us unable to make our own primary steel. They continue to refuse to engage with the First Minister of Wales to discuss the matter, demonstrating nothing but callous indifference to the thousands of workers—my constituents included—whose livelihoods are at stake thanks to this Government's incompetence. Let us not forget the bigger picture: the lives and livelihoods of those who work in a supply chain and the local economy—even those who work on the tugboats bringing the ships into port—are affected.

For too many people, it can be hard to remember a time when Government politicians could be trusted to act in the public's interests and to a standard expected in public life. Indeed, in these unprecedented times, the only thing that seems certain is the persistence of chaos from our governing party. The country is fed up and deserves better than this mayhem with no mandate. I remember why I got into politics—as a single mother and a schoolteacher at the time of the Tory-Lib Dem coalition in 2010, it hit me then—but it is no wonder that after being ignored for 14 years our public servants feel how they feel today. The petitioners' ask is clear: to be given the opportunity to have their say on how they want this country to be governed.

The legislation is clear that the current Parliament must be dissolved no later than five years after it first met, which places the deadline for dissolution on 17 December 2024. Any decision to dissolve sooner and call an early election is at the discretion of the Prime Minister. Failing that, Government Members can join Opposition Members to put things right. The Prime Minister has already indicated a willingness to hold an early general election by ruling out an election in January 2025. Having outlined the current state of this country, it can be hard to imagine how things could possibly get any worse. Sound familiar? We have been here before, and it is becoming increasingly clear that the longer the Government delay giving people their say, the more damage their incompetence will inflict on this country.

Deltapoll polling for *The Mirror* at the beginning of January found that half of the public, and even 38% of Conservative voters, say they want an election by the end of the spring. Only 12% like the sound of the Prime Minister's working assumption of an election in the second half of the year. Members of Parliament have a duty to the public to govern in the national interest. In that vein, will the Minister say when the public will have a chance to decide who should lead us going forward? Will the Government act in line with the interests of the British people, and their own voters, and call for an immediate general election? Whichever Government are elected, they will at least have the support of the public and the mandate to govern.

The Prime Minister is attempting to inspire the Tory party faithful by pitching himself as a change candidate. His party has been in power for 14 years, and it is true that in that time it has faced some very difficult external factors, including the pandemic and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. However, this Government have only mishandled their responses to those factors, and they have consistently made political choices, with the lack of a clear mandate, that have made things so much worse. They have no right to claim that they have the solutions to the problems they created themselves. The petition calls on the Government to put an end to the chaos and uncertainty by giving the people their say. It is time for the Government to put the national interests first.

4.46 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I was not expecting to be called quite so early—I thought many more people would be keen to speak in this debate. Thank you for chairing it, Mr Dowd, and I thank the Petitions Committee—particularly the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who led the debate masterfully and covered a huge number of issues and the reasons why petitioners signed the petition.

I first got involved in party politics and joined the SNP in 2001. When we were out canvassing and campaigning, it was not unusual for us to knock on doors and for people to say, "I'm not sure who I'm voting for." In some circumstances, people were inevitably voting Tory, but they were too shy to tell us because they were embarrassed about it. That was quite a common thing back then—it was quite common for a significant number of years. We then had the Lib Dem-Tory coalition, and there was a bit more optimism around the Conservatives and people were actually willing to admit to us that they were voting Conservative. Well, that has disappeared again. Believe it or not, there are some people in Aberdeen North who vote Conservative—in fact, the Conservatives came second there in the last election. We have all these people who are pretty definitely going to vote Conservative, but they are now too embarrassed to say it, because they are looking at the situation down here in Westminster and they are unwilling to admit that that is the party they are going to vote for.

There are so many issues that it is difficult to pack them all into a short speech, but I will try to cover a few. First, on inflation and household bills, which the hon. Member for Gower covered masterfully, this UK Government have failed to do enough. They stand up and talk about the fact that inflation has dropped, but prices are still going up. We still have inflation. Potatoes, pasta, rice—the most basic foodstuffs, which people cannot avoid buying—have increased massively in price. We cannot avoid buying some of those essentials, and their prices continue to increase. I do not know how often you buy butter or margarine, Mr Dowd, but it is twice the price that it was just a couple of short years ago. Again, that is a staple. People need fats in their diet. We need all sorts of different foods in our diet. If the prices keep going up—and they are, because inflation continues to go up—then things get even worse and people can no longer afford to buy things. That is without the energy prices that people are now paying, and the UK Government's refusal to provide another energy rebate despite the fact that they know that folk cannot afford to live right now.

I have been in elected politics since 2007 and I have never seen less optimism. Before, when people came to us because they were struggling and had money problems, we could quite often say, "Are you claiming everything that you're supposed to be claiming?" We could give them advice and give them options. Now, because people are already claiming everything they are entitled to, the only option we can give them is food banks. How have we reached the point in 2024 when the only ray of sunlight for so many families is the fact that they can get a food parcel every so often? It is absolutely unconscionable that we are in this situation, and it is because of the choices being made by the Conservative Government. It just is the case that they could make different choices, which would allow people to eat, heat their homes and feed their children better.

The Government need to reassess social security and ensure that it is enough to live on, because at the moment it is not. The augmentation of universal credit for those on the lowest wages still does not give them enough money to live on, and the UK Government's pretendy living wage is not enough to live on either. People are working all the hours they can and claiming everything they possibly can—they might be disabled and unable to work—yet they still do not have enough money to live. It is no wonder that people are completely and totally fed up.

Significant parts of the public sector are devolved in Scotland, including the NHS. However, if the UK Government continue to squeeze the public sector by giving it less and less money, and if they continue to privatise parts of the NHS, then, because of the Barnett formula, that will have a significant impact on Scotland's budget. The Scottish Government cannot borrow in the way that the UK Government can, and they have to deliver a balanced budget every year, yet they are being constrained by choices that are not our own, because of the decision-making processes in Westminster. All those decisions to cut public services in England and Wales, or in England or in the UK as a whole, have a knock-on impact on Scotland's budgets, and on Wales and Northern Ireland as well.

It is ridiculous that the public sector is being so squeezed that it is struggling to afford to provide even basic services, and neither the NHS nor public sector workloads are helped by the UK Government's immigration decisions. It is more difficult than ever to get people to work in care, for example, because of the changes being made to immigration. After London, Aberdeen is the city with the highest percentage of people born outside the UK. We have a massive immigrant population in Aberdeen, and we love that; it is brilliant. We have an immensely multicultural, diverse city—I was at a Hindu event on Saturday night. Aberdeen is vibrant because of that, but it is becoming increasingly difficult because of the UK Government's ideological opposition to immigration.

People in my constituency would rather have care workers to look after them than have immigration stamped out. In Aberdeen, we have got hotels run by Mears that are full of asylum seekers who the UK Government do not allow to work. I mean, for goodness' sake, allow people to work and contribute to the economy and the society they are living in. It is better for everybody, if they have got an asylum claim in, if they are allowed to work and contribute—if they are allowed to integrate, become part of the community and provide support, and particularly care for our older people.

[Kirsty Blackman]

The other thing that has happened in relation to democracy and trust is that each of the significant number of Conservative Prime Ministers that we have had, one after the other—we could almost say that it might be a ploy—has been able to put a whole bunch of people in the House of Lords and thereby unbalance it even more. If we have five Conservative Prime Ministers in eight years—and who knows how many there might have been by the end of this year—then we get tranches of people sitting in the House of Lords with a Conservative hat on.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Can the hon. Member think of another time when the governing party changed Prime Minister twice during a Parliament without going to the country, because I cannot?

Kirsty Blackman: No, I cannot think of such a time either, and it is really shocking that we are in this situation, especially because, as the hon. Member for Gower laid out, the current Prime Minister was not elected by anyone apart from the people in his constituency. He was not even elected by the Conservatives; they did not want him, but they ended up with him as their second choice. The people have not had their say. They have not had the opportunity to say, “Yes, we’re happy with this situation. We’re happy with the former Prime Minister crashing the economy and our mortgage rates going through the roof and the UK refusing to cancel VAT on those mortgage rates.” They have not had the opportunity to say that. I think that they would say, “We’re deeply unhappy and pessimistic about the future. We don’t see that there is a ray of sunshine here, because the system continues to be broken.”

In the last few years, this UK Government have done what they can to erode democracy. They have done what they can to ensure that it is more difficult for people to vote, including introducing voter ID, which we in Scotland vehemently oppose. Actually, if we look at it, we see that it is not the case that there is voter fraud. The requirement for voter ID just means that people who are less privileged and more disadvantaged are less likely to be able to take part in democracy, which suits some Conservatives down to the ground. It is completely shocking that we are in this situation.

I will just mention a couple of other things. Regarding climate change and a just transition, energy prices are going up. The UK Government are putting through the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill to ensure that there is more licensing of oil and gas fields, which will make absolutely no difference to the prices that people pay for their energy. What it will make a difference to is the profits of those energy companies—that is where it will make a positive difference. Those companies will have higher profits if they are able to carry out more exploration and have more fields licensed as a result of those explorations. It takes something like 16 years for a field to come through, so licensing more today will not make any difference to the prices that my constituents are paying for their energy.

The Government are doing these things, making these decisions and making statements about climate change, for example about electric cars, in the face of ever-increasing extreme weather events and ever-increasing climate change. The world is not meeting its climate change targets, and

if we ask young people what they are concerned about, we find that it is climate change. They are particularly concerned that our political leaders are refusing to concede that climate change is the most important issue and needs to be tackled. The UK Government need to lead from the front but they are absolutely failing to do so. They should be supporting renewable energy—energies of the future—rather than pouring more time and energy into increasing the amount of fossil fuels that we are getting out of the sea.

As for EU membership, we were dragged out of the EU against the will of the people of Scotland, despite being explicitly promised during the Scottish independence referendum that the way to stay part of the EU was to remain part of the UK. So many people in Scotland voted no in the Scottish independence referendum because they felt so strongly about the EU and believed what Better Together campaigners were telling them. Then, immediately after the 2019 general election, we were taken out of the EU, despite every single constituency in Scotland—every single area in Scotland—voting to remain in the EU. We have now left the EU, and that has had a significant negative impact. There has been a ratcheting impact on inflation, for example; leaving the EU has meant that we are more negatively impacted by those issues. The Minister will no doubt say that that is entirely because of global factors, but it is just not; it has been exacerbated extremely by Brexit.

The solution, as put forward in the petition, is to have a general election and allow people to have their say. The reality for people in Scotland is that we have a lifeboat, which we want to take to get us out of here. We have been asking for an independence referendum. We have been making it clear that we are utterly fed up with the Westminster system and the decisions that are being taken down here—even things like the fact that the timing of the general election is entirely in the hands of the Prime Minister, whereas the timing of elections in Scotland is set by statute. They happen on a regular basis—every four or five years. There was a change that needed to take place to realign elections, but they take place on a four-year cycle.

It is grim that we end up in this situation and the UK Government can just say, “No, we don’t want to let them have an independence referendum. It doesn’t matter how many people in Scotland want independence; it’s up to us. We are going to make those decisions on behalf of the people of Scotland,” just as they are making so many other decisions on behalf of the people of Scotland. But the decisions that they are making about immigration, human rights and climate change are not being made in the name of the people of Scotland. We need the chance to take that lifeboat to get out of here so that we can make our own decisions—the right decisions for the people who live and work in Scotland—rather having decisions made by the Westminster Government, whoever it is that they are making those decisions for, because they certainly are not making them for the benefit of the general population.

5.1 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. The contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and the hon. Member for Aberdeen

North (Kirsty Blackman) set out the real sense across the UK that it is time for change. In my constituency alone, 768 people have signed the petition we are debating.

People do not have to follow politics closely to see that this is a withering Government at the end of their days. The sooner the public can have their say, the better. Yet our unelected Prime Minister is too scared to commit to a date for the election. He is clinging on to power, hoping things will get better, but the writing is on the wall and his party knows it. Just look at the events of the last three weeks. We have seen a Tory MP resigning over the party's direction and another senior Tory MP calling on the Prime Minister to stand down, and now we learn that there is a group of ex-advisers, Tory donors and rebel MPs in the shadows trying to topple him. No doubt the leadership campaign domain names are already quietly being purchased: MoveOverForMordaunt.org, BelieveInBadenoch.co.uk and BowDownToBraverman.com. But no matter who the leader is, the one thing these Tories have in common is that it is party first, country second.

For years now, our politics has been held hostage by the factionalism inside the Conservative party. This chaos is unsustainable and we can no longer afford it. For once, the Conservatives should put the country first and call an election, because people are crying out for change. The mandate for this is clear. Even the Prime Minister knows it. It explains his inability to stick to a strategy as he attempts to match the public mood. This time last year, he was branding himself as Mr Competent. He was all about delivery. Remember the five pledges? Well, the only one he delivered on was the only one that was not actually in his control, so at conference he switched to being Mr Change, correctly putting forward the argument that the country needs change, but incorrectly—and staggeringly—putting forward his answer: five more years of the Conservatives. And then what did Mr Change go and do? He hired a former Prime Minister as his Foreign Secretary. With the Mr Change narrative not sticking, what has he now settled on? Mr Continuity: “Stick with me, because it is better the devil you know.” Well, he had better call an election soon, because at this rate he is going to run out of new Mr Men to choose from.

Despite the Prime Minister trying to say the answer to the question of change is another five years of the Conservatives, we will not be fooled. Just look at the last 14 years: failure on the economy, on the NHS and on tackling crime. None of that would change with a fifth Conservative term. The Conservatives have no right to complain that they have the solutions to the problems they created. Remember that the Conservatives chose, through ideology, to crash the economy with their mini Budget. Families up and down the country are still paying the price through increased mortgages and rents. As we enter the election year, the Conservatives may masquerade as tax cutters by reducing national insurance, but this is the biggest tax-raising Parliament in living memory. For every 10p by which they have increased working people's taxes, their tax gimmick gives only 2p back. The average family is set to be £1,200 a year worse off under the Prime Minister's tax plan, at the very moment that we are also living through a Tory cost of living crisis. We can look far and wide, but they have no plan for the economy.

The chaos does not end there. The Conservatives have also pushed our NHS on to its knees. They have wasted £3 billion on a top-down reorganisation, instead of investing in the equipment and technology that a modern health service requires. Millions of patients have been waiting two weeks or more for a GP appointment, but is that really a surprise, given that GP numbers have been cut by 2,000? Overall, across the NHS, waiting lists have hit record levels, yet the Government throw their hands up and say it is not their fault. It is a simple equation: the longer the Conservatives are in government, the longer patients wait. And sadly, the longer they are in power, the more political chaos we experience. Since 2015, we have had five Prime Ministers, seven Chancellors and 13 Housing Ministers. Government cannot run effectively with that kind of churn. Imagine a financial adviser trying to get someone to invest in a business that had that kind of turnover in its leadership. They would run a mile.

That is not even taking into account the misconduct and sleaze: £3.5 billion-worth of covid contracts awarded to Tory-linked firms, Tory MPs facing accusations of cash for access and favours, and of course partygate, which shows as clearly as possible that, with the Conservatives, it is one rule for them and another for the rest of the country. They have fundamentally broken the trust the public should be able to have in their leaders.

Indeed, while the economy flatlines, the only thing that continues to grow—aside from NHS waiting lists—is the number of factions of Conservative MPs. They have the New Conservatives, the No Turning Back group, the Conservative Growth Group, the European Research Group, the Northern Research Group and—wait for it—the Common Sense Group. Then, just last week, we saw the launch of the Popular Conservatism group, led by a former leader who was so popular that they were outlasted by a lettuce. That splintering is emblematic of a failed political force. None of them can agree on the direction of their party, let alone the direction of our country. It is becoming clearer and clearer that the Tories are not governing for the country. They are not even pretending to fight for the British people. It is all about their party; it is all about a game for power.

Meanwhile, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has changed the Labour party. He has put it back in the service of working people: a party that is proud, does not take its support for granted and will always put the country first. It is a party that has the direction and hunger to actually effect change. That is captured in our long-term plan for the country—a plan to turn the page on the last 14 years and change the country for the better.

We need a mission-driven Government who can deliver a decade of national renewal, financial stability and strong fiscal rules so that we never have a repeat of the disastrous Tory mini Budget. We will build 1.5 million more homes over the next Parliament, with first-time buyers given first dibs. We will get the NHS back on its feet, and deliver 2 million more operations and NHS procedures to cut waiting lists. We will deliver 700,000 new dental appointments and take back our streets from gangs, drug dealers and fly-tippers, with stronger policing and guaranteed patrols in town centres. We will provide opportunity for every child through free breakfast clubs in every primary school, more specialist teachers,

[Ellie Reeves]

and better training and apprenticeships, so that every young person is ready for work and ready for life. We will make work pay through our new deal for working people, banning zero-hours contracts and outlawing fire and rehire. That is what a serious, united party can deliver.

Our country is crying out for change after the last 14 years of chaos. In just 94 days, on 2 May, we will have local and mayoral elections. Throughout the country, voters will be going to the polls for local councils and nine combined authority mayors. Thousands of candidates of all persuasions will be putting themselves forward so that voters can give their verdict. They should all be commended, and the winners will have a mandate. That is more than the Prime Minister currently has, which is why he should call a general election. No one voted for the third Tory Prime Minister of this Parliament—not even his own party. He has no mandate, which is why he has no authority and why the Tory soap opera continues. He should have gone to the country when he became Prime Minister, but he denied the public their say. Bottling it again would be to hold the country in contempt, condemning us to more of this unnecessary and counterproductive Tory in-fighting.

We need to have our say on the last 14 years. Do we want another five years like the last, with chaos, decline and failure, or do we want real change and national renewal with a mission-driven Labour party? This is the question when the election comes. The Government should call a general election now, so that people can have their say.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I can see that it is going to be a long year. We will have plenty of time over the next few months to rehearse all the points put across by Opposition Members, and no doubt some of the points that I will put across from the Government. I thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on moving the motion on behalf of the signatories to the e-petition, which calls for an immediate general election.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government, but I am sorry to have to tell the hon. Lady that the requisite authority has not been delegated to me at this time and I am unable to grant her wish for an immediate election. In the absence of such powers, I can refer her to what the Prime Minister has already said—that he is expecting a general election in the second half of 2024, so it could be as soon as five months away. The hon. Lady will be aware that the authority rests with the Prime Minister and the King, but we will have an election in 2024.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked for a ray of sunshine, and here I am. There are extraordinary stories to be told from the past 14 years. There are better state schools, as judged by PISA,

the programme for international student assessment. We are doing better in international rankings than ever before, thanks to the reforms and investment that we have made. There are better apprenticeships, helping more young people to earn while they learn and move into work. We have the best universities in Europe, sought after by many; record employment, underpinned by an improved welfare system in the form of universal credit; more free childcare than ever before; a national living wage; same-sex marriage; two new aircraft carriers; and the fastest decarbonisation of any major economy. We appreciate that we still have further to go, but emissions are down by more than 50% since their peak in the '70s.

Brexit has been delivered, with global free trade deals, notably an enormously important one with the Pacific. We have more money than ever before in the NHS; record numbers of doctors and nurses; neighbourhood crime down by 50%; and 2.5 million homes. Not only have we had better growth since 2010 than Germany, France, Italy and Spain, but the International Monetary Fund expects the UK to have better growth than Germany, France, Italy and Japan in the medium term. Last year, the UK overtook France as the eighth largest manufacturing nation on earth.

These are all the result of choices. They are all the result of the decisions taken by Conservative Governments since 2010. Have this Conservative Government achieved that because we were handed a golden legacy by the previous Labour Government? Not a bit of it. When we took over, the economy was in the sewer. Since that time, we have managed to deal with the largest public health crisis in a century, the largest war in Europe since 1945, the biggest energy crisis since the 1970s and the highest inflation since the 1980s—and still the projections for our country going forward are good, and confidence in our nation's economy among our international partners remains high.

I look forward to taking these arguments and more to the electorate in the months ahead, and I look forward to rehearsing the back and forth with hon. Members in the Chamber and beyond.

5.16 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank hon. Members who have participated in the debate. I was quite surprised that we did not have a higher turnout, because the demand for a general election is so great. I understand that the Minister is not the Prime Minister, which is a great shame, because we need answers now. As a member of the Opposition party, I look forward to the next general election, as I am sure many others do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 641904 relating to the next general election.

5.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 29 January 2024

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Grassroots Sports Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): We know that active people are fitter, happier and healthier, which is why we have set out our ambitious “Get Active Strategy” to get over 3.5 million people more active by 2030, including 1 million young people. Delivering on this strengthens our communities, makes us healthier—both physically and mentally—and creates a more prosperous society.

To achieve this, it is vital that everyone, regardless of their background or location, has access to world-class sports facilities. That is why we continue to support, sustain and grow community and grassroots sport with this historic level of investment.

As part of this commitment, His Majesty’s Government are delivering historic investment to improve and upgrade multi-sport pitches and facilities across the whole UK. Our investment of over £320 million between 2021 and 2025 will help to level up grassroots facilities, target those communities most in need, and increase participation in sport among under-represented groups—for example, women and girls, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. In fact, any project in England receiving a grant of over £25,000 must provide an equal access usage plan for women and girls. At least 50% of this funding is going directly to the most deprived areas across the UK, and over 40% of projects are also supporting a sport other than football in order to spread the benefits as widely as possible.

Since 2021, over £200 million has been invested in over 1,800 projects up and down the country, improving the natural and artificial grass pitches on offer to communities and upgrading floodlights, goalposts, changing rooms and toilet facilities. These are all delivered in partnership with the Football Foundation in England and the Football Association in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Combined with funding from the FA and the Premier League in England, our investment is delivering real change in the communities that need it most across the UK—from Fermanagh to Rhondda, and from Grimsby to Motherwell.

On Saturday we announced the sites that have received a share of £93 million in 2023-24 so far—over 1,100 projects delivering vital improvements to grassroots facilities and increasing opportunities to play for under-represented groups. A full list of the projects can be found on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/multi-sport-grassroots-facilities-programme-projects-2023-to-2024> and have been placed in the Library of the House.

With a further Government investment of over £120 million to come next year, including £25 million towards the £30 million Lionesses Futures Fund to get girls playing, we will continue to build on this historic

investment. We are committed to inspiring future generations of sporting talent, increasing participation in physical activity, and levelling up facilities across the UK.

[HCWS217]

Telegraph Media Group: Public Interest Intervention Notice

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): I would like to make a statement on my decision to intervene in the anticipated acquisition of Telegraph Media Group Ltd by RB Investco Ltd.

My Department has written to solicitors acting for the Barclay family and RedBird IMI, the current and proposed owners of Telegraph Media Group, to inform them of my decision to issue a public interest intervention notice (PIIN) in relation to the anticipated acquisition of the Telegraph Media Group by RB Investco.

This is further to information that my Department received this week that Redbird IMI has made changes to the corporate structure of the potential acquiring entities of the Telegraph Media Group, which has created a new relevant merger situation.

This PIIN relates to concerns that I continue to have that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002—that are relevant to the anticipated acquisition of the Telegraph Media Group by RedBird IMI and that these concerns warrant further investigation.

At this stage, my decision to issue the PIIN triggers the requirement for the Competition and Markets Authority to report to me on jurisdictional and competition matters; and for Ofcom to report to me on the media public interest considerations in section 58(2A) of the Enterprise Act 2002—namely, the need for accurate presentation of news and free expression of opinion in newspapers. Having consulted the CMA and Ofcom on the time they need to conduct the necessary investigations, I have asked them to report to me by 9 am GMT on 11 March 2024.

My Department has also written to Ofcom and the CMA today to extend the deadline by when I expect to receive their reports in relation to the PIIN that I issued on 30 November 2023. I now expect them to report to me on this PIIN also by 9 am GMT on 11 March 2024. This means the 30 November PIIN and the associated pre-emptive action order that I made on 1 December 2023 both remain in force.

I reserve the right to take such further action under the Act as I consider appropriate, which may include exercising my powers under section 42 in relation to any other relevant merger situation. My decision to issue a PIIN is without prejudice to my ability to take any such additional action in accordance with the Act.

My role as Secretary of State in this process is quasi-judicial and procedures are in place to ensure that I act independently and follow a process that is scrupulously fair, transparent and impartial.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport will update Parliament after both reports from the regulators have been received and considered.

[HCWS216]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Low-carbon Hydrogen Standard: Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my noble Friend Lord Callanan, has today made the following statement:

I am making this statement to fulfil the commitment to inform Parliament via a written ministerial statement whenever the ambulatory reference to the UK Low Carbon Hydrogen Standard—the Standard—in the Hydrogen Production Revenue Support—Directions, Eligibility and Counterparty—Regulations 2023—the Regulations—is updated. A new version of the standard—version 3—has now been published.

The Energy Act 2023 (“the Act”) makes provision for the implementation of the Hydrogen Production Business Model (HPBM), which is intended to provide revenue support to overcome the cost gap between low-carbon hydrogen and higher carbon counterfactual fuels. The HPBM is designed to incentivise the production and use of low-carbon hydrogen, supporting the UK’s net zero and energy security ambitions.

Section 57(1) sets out the overarching power for the Secretary of State to make regulations in relation to revenue support contracts. There are a number of provisions in chapter 1, part 2 of the Act that set out the matters that regulations made under section 57(1) may cover. The provision in section 66(5) of the Act enables revenue support regulations determining the meaning of “eligible” in relation to a low-carbon hydrogen producer to make ambulatory reference to published documents, including standards, external to the regulations—i.e. as the documents have effect from time to time. Given the nascency of the hydrogen industry and the need for regulations underpinning the hydrogen production revenue support contracts to provide sufficient certainty to investors, the ability to make ambulatory reference in regulations provides flexibility to help ensure the scheme is in line with the latest technological developments to encourage ongoing innovation and investment. This approach also aligns with consultation feedback to ensure alignment with the UK Government’s definition of low-carbon hydrogen when allocating support to projects under the Hydrogen Production Business Model.

The regulations were laid in draft in Parliament on 8 November 2023 and came into force on 20 December 2023. Bar certain exceptions for low-carbon hydrogen producers who applied for financial support before the commencement date of the regulations, the regulations determine whether a low-carbon hydrogen producer is “eligible” in relation to proposals it makes for the production of hydrogen produced in accordance with the low-carbon hydrogen standard. The regulations define “the low carbon hydrogen standard” as the document published by the Secretary of State in April 2023 entitled “UK Low Carbon Hydrogen Standard – Version 2” or such standard as may be from time to time published for the purposes of these regulations by the Secretary of State. The regulations provide that where the Secretary of State publishes a new or revised low-carbon hydrogen standard for the purposes of the regulations, the publication of the new or revised standard must include, or be accompanied by, a statement in writing that it is published to replace the previous version of the standard.

The standard sets a maximum threshold for the amount of greenhouse gas emissions allowed in the production process for hydrogen to be considered “low-carbon hydrogen”. It sets out the methodology for calculating the emissions associated with hydrogen production using production pathways in scope of the standard, and the steps that producers should take to prove that the hydrogen they produce is compliant with the standard.

On 13 December 2023, in the period between the regulations being laid in draft and coming into force, version 3 of the standard was published and focuses on ensuring that the requirements set out in the standard are clear and can be effectively applied under hydrogen production revenue support contracts and other future schemes. More consistent language is used in version 3 for indicating requirements of the standard, recommendations and permissible actions, and there has been restructuring and rationalisation of text for accuracy and conciseness. A key change to version 3 of the standard is to include “Gas Splitting Producing Solid Carbon” on the list of hydrogen production pathways that are within scope of the standard. At the time of publication, it was made clear that it was intended that version 3 of the standard would be the version for the purposes of the regulations when the regulations come into force.

The standard was republished on the 21 December 2023 to confirm that version 3 replaces any previous versions of the standard for the purposes of the regulations. This means that currently version 3 of the standard is the one that is to be used for assessing eligibility under the regulations, bar certain exceptions as mentioned above.

Further details on the standard and the changes made can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-low-carbon-hydrogen-standard-emissions-reporting-and-sustainability-criteria>.

[HCWS215]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Smoking and Vaping

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): Today, the UK Government with the devolved Administrations have published our response to the UK-wide consultation, “Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping”.

Tobacco is the single most important entirely preventable cause of ill health, disability and death in this country. It is responsible for 80,000 deaths in the UK a year and one in four of all UK cancer deaths. Smoking is one of the biggest drivers of health inequalities across the country. The majority of smokers know about the risks of smoking and want to quit but are unable to due to the addictive nature of tobacco. Four in five smokers start before the age of 20 and are then addicted for life.

Smoking costs the country £17 billion a year, including the £14 billion cost to productivity, which is equivalent to 6.9p in every £1 of income tax received. In comparison, the tax raised in duty revenue is only around £10.2 billion per year. Smoking puts a significant pressure on the NHS and wider health and social care services.

Moreover, while the evidence is clear that vapes can be an effective tool to help smokers to quit, we are incredibly worried about the alarming levels of illicit youth vaping—rates have tripled in the last three years with around one in five 11 to 17-year-olds in Great Britain now having tried vaping. Vaping carries the risk of future harms and nicotine addiction and, therefore, is never recommended for children. Despite this, it is clear that vapes are being deliberately targeted and marketed at them.

It is essential that we take action to protect future generations from the harms of smoking and stop youth vaping. That is why on 12 October, the Department of Health and Social Care published a Command Paper, “Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree

generation". Following this, we published a consultation, together with the devolved Administrations to gather evidence and views to inform future legislative measures and next steps.

The consultation ran for eight weeks from 12 October 2023 to 6 December 2023. We received nearly 28,000 valid responses to the consultation from a wide range of stakeholders across the UK. A clear majority of responders, 63.2%, supported the ambitious proposal to create the first smokefree generation—one of the most significant public health measures in a generation.

The UK Government and devolved Administrations' response to the consultation therefore sets out our plan to introduce legislation as soon as possible. Legislation will introduce measures to:

Change the age of sale for all tobacco products, cigarette papers and herbal smoking products whereby anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 will never legally be sold tobacco products alongside prohibiting proxy sales and changing warning notices in retail premises.

Stop vapes from being deliberately targeted at children, while continuing to support adult smokers to quit using vapes to help. It will introduce new regulatory-making powers to restrict flavours, point of sale and packaging for vaping products—nicotine and non-nicotine—as well as other consumer nicotine products. Any restrictions will be taken forward in subsequent secondary legislation, which will be subject to further consultation.

Introduce new fixed-penalty notices for England and Wales to the value of £100 for underage sale, proxy sale and free distribution of tobacco and vapes—nicotine and non-nicotine—and regulate to extend these provisions to other consumer nicotine products.

Additionally, the consultation confirms that the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government intend to introduce legislation to implement a ban on the sale and supply of disposable vapes. The UK Government will work with the devolved Administrations to explore an import ban. Northern Ireland officials acknowledge the issues raised during the consultation and will consider potential legislation in future.

These legislative measures sit alongside a package of support to help current smokers quit—including doubling the funding for local authority stop smoking services. They also sit alongside additional enforcement funding. HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and Border Force have published a new illicit tobacco strategy, "Stubbing out the problem", setting out their continued commitment to reduce the trade in, and demand for, illicit tobacco, and to tackle and disrupt the organised crime groups behind the illicit tobacco trade. The strategy sets out the new root and branch approach, which targets the demand for illicit trade—the consumers that criminals seek to exploit—as well as the supply—the criminals themselves. It is supported by new funding over the next five years which will be used to boost HMRC and Border Force enforcement capability. The strategy also establishes a new, cross-Government illicit tobacco taskforce, combining the operational, investigative and intelligence expertise of various agencies, and enhancing HMRC's ability to disrupt organised crime.

I am grateful to the many people who took time to respond to the consultation which helped us accurately consider this policy. The consultation response has been published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS219]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Election Finance Regulation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): In July 2023, the Government confirmed their intention (HCWS985) to proceed with uprating reserved and excepted party and candidate spending limits and donations thresholds to reflect historic inflation in the years since the respective limits were set between the years 2000 and 2020. The intention to review these thresholds was set out in December 2020, and the Parliamentary Parties Panel was consulted.

Today, the Government have laid before Parliament legislation completing the uprating of candidate spending limits by uprating the limits for candidates at Greater London Authority elections and local authority mayoral elections. The latter will align with the planned new spending limits for combined authority and combined county authority mayoral elections, ensuring parity between mayoralties.

The uprating of election spending limits is necessary as many of the statutory limits, set in absolute terms, have not been uprated in recent times. Some have not changed since 2000, as is the case for Greater London Authority elections. The lack of change in absolute terms impacts campaigning ability, given the increased costs of printing, postage and communication, which is vital for parties and candidates to engage with voters.

Parliament anticipated this, which is why the legislation allows for these limits to be adjusted to account for inflation. The Government's policy is to increase them so that they are the same in real terms as the original limits set by Parliament.

Furthermore, violence and intimidation cannot be tolerated and will have absolutely no place in our public life. The Elections Act 2022 provides for new measures to tackle intimidation in elections, building on the wider work to address intimidation in public life—as outlined in the written statement of 9 March 2021 (HCWS833).

No one should feel afraid to participate in our democracy. To provide clarity on the issue of whether security expenses fall to be regulated under electoral law, the legislation laid today also explicitly exempts reasonable security expenses from contributing to spending limits for political parties, candidates and other campaigners at reserved and excepted UK elections. This will ensure that these limits are not a barrier to providing adequate security during election campaigns.

Many parties and agents already take the view that money spent on the security of a candidate is clearly not money spent promoting that candidate to the electorate; however, the Government believe there are merits in explicitly stating this in law to provide greater clarity.

Together, with the other recent instruments the Government have made, these measures will support continued democratic engagement by political parties and candidates, and facilitate continued freedom of expression whilst ensuring our elections remain safe, free and fair.

[HCWS218]

Ministerial Correction

Monday 29 January 2024

DEFENCE

Situation in the Red Sea

The following is an extract from the debate on the Situation in the Red Sea on Wednesday 24 January 2024.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for interrupting the Defence Secretary. On the shipping side of things, there has been an extraordinary reduction in confidence in that route. The only way to restore the confidence of ships to pass through the gulf of Aden and up through the Red sea is an increase in military convoys. I am sure he is coming to this, but what steps are being taken to drive up military convoys to escort vessels through that passage?

Grant Shapps: ...Last week, I was onboard HMS Diamond—which is right at the heart of the issue in the Red sea—talking to our brave sailors who are out there protecting our critical sea lanes. The House will know that this is the first Royal Navy ship's company for 32 years who have fired in anger—or in self-defence, in their case.

[Official Report, 24 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 350.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps):

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) in the debate on the Situation in the Red Sea.

The correct response should have been:

Grant Shapps: ...Last week, I was onboard HMS Diamond—which is right at the heart of the issue in the Red sea—talking to our brave sailors who are out there protecting our critical sea lanes. The House will know that this is the first Royal Navy ship's company for 32 years **to fire at an aerial target** in anger—and in self-defence, in their case.

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**not later than
Monday 5 February 2024**

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